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T8435539

**Student integration in a new Higher Education
Institution**

Doctor of Education (EdD)

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Abstract

Student integration is a concern for every educational institution. This study focuses on student integration within the business school of a new Higher Education Institution (HEI) based in Scotland. The case study HEI is fictitiously referred to as Thistle College. The study of integration is not new but most of the research has been based on retention and integration in American institutions, indicating a need for more research on integration in the UK.

Initially the research focused on why students withdrew from College, but the research focus was revised due to the problems of accessing student drop-outs. The revised study investigated why students stayed on their course and what influenced their decision to persist in their studies.

The methodology involved desk research, student questionnaires and semi structured interviews with students and staff.

The research provides evidence of the changing face of the student population and the challenges faced by students who claim they need to spend as much time in part-time work as they do in the HEI. The research provides an analysis of the life of present day students and a better understanding of the student experience and the changing expectations of the student population. The research indicates that students are organising their College studies around their lives rather than their lives around their studies. There is less commitment to the College and more commitment to part-time work and their lifestyle outside of College. There is less academic and social integration: students rely more on the relationships formed with staff and their peers than the one they have with the College as an institution.

The study provides a number of recommendations for the College to integrate and retain students through enhancing the student experience and managing expectations from pre-entry through to graduation. Although these recommendations are case study specific, HEIs which share similar characteristics may also find these recommendations relevant.

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Lastly I would like to thank all the students and staff who took part in the research that made the EdD a worthwhile experience. I thank them for their time, openness and willingness to share their experiences which made the journey enlightening and at times humbling.

Glossary of Terms

A Level:	Advanced Level, subject based qualification, part of the General Certificate of Education
APEL:	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APL:	Accreditation of Prior Learning
CertHE:	Certificate in Higher Education
FE:	Further Education
HE:	Higher Education
HEI:	Higher Education Institution
Highers:	Scottish Certificate of Education at Higher Grade
HNC:	Higher National Certificate
HND:	Higher National Diploma
O Level:	Ordinary Level, subject based qualification, part of the General Certificate of Education
ONC:	Ordinary National Certificate, equivalent to 2 A Levels
OND:	Ordinary National Diploma, equivalent to 3 A levels
PGCert HE:	Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education
SAAS:	Student Awards Agency for Scotland
SFC:	Scottish Funding Council
SFEFC:	Scottish Further Education Funding Council
SHEFC:	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
Standard Grade:	Scotland’s educational qualification for students aged 14-16 years
UCAS:	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UK Credits:	1 UK credit equates to 10 notional hours of successful learning activity

Chapter 1

Introduction

This research project investigates student integration in a new HEI. The research undertaken is original in that it investigates student integration in a case study set in a new HEI based in Scotland. The researcher has been unable to locate any similarly localised case study within the literature. The research investigates the factors that influence student integration and also the strategies adopted by the HEI to integrate and as a result retain students. Student integration is a problem for every HEI and much of the literature and theory has been generated by writers outside of the UK. There has been some research in England but there is a need to increase research on student integration in Scotland. The research is more important when we consider the changing face of the student population and the challenges faced by students who need to spend as much time in part-time work as they do in the HEI. The research should lead to a better understanding of the student experience and the changing expectations of the student population. This understanding should lead to changes in integration strategies and policy reviews/developments that may aid student integration and retention in the case study HEI.

During the course of the research the thesis title changed and the words ‘retention and’ were removed to place more emphasis on ‘integration’ which is the true nature of the research. However it is clear from the project that integration and retention are interlinked themes. There is evidence in the literature review that student retention can come through academic and social integration. The models proposed to understand and improve retention have many components that are linked to integration. At times the retention strategies adopted by institutions could be construed as integration strategies.

The view point will change depending on who is advocating or implementing the strategy. The strategies could be claimed to be ones that integrate and at the same time retain students. The difference between the two themes is the end result, students are integrated and as a consequence they are retained. As stated earlier the retention literature has strong links with student integration and in this project forms the basis for understanding integration. There is the danger integration and retention are seen as the same thing and the author realises the boundary between the two can be fuzzy at times. Certainly the project indicates the institution develops integration and retention policies/strategies. However the project's primary focus is on student expectations and experiences and how these enable integration, which can result in student retention.

The project is organised over seven chapters. Chapter one indicates the content and themes covered in each of the chapters to enable the reader to follow the development of the research carried out. Chapter two sets the background to the research project indicating the influence of Government policy on HEIs, in particular the need to provide wider access to students from poorer socio-economic groups, the need to increase the participation rate of students and the drive for national competitiveness through a better educated workforce. The chapter also indicates the changes in funding and its impact on HEIs. The chapter goes on to describe the current trends in student participation in HE. The chapter introduces Thistle College as the case study in this research and sets out the background of the College and the boundaries of the research carried out, and in doing so, indicates how far the findings from the research can be applied more generally. The research questions are then stated and validated in this chapter.

Chapter three is a literature review on the topics of integration and retention. Chapter three explores a number of integration and retention models. Many of these models have been developed in America and the researcher reviews their relevance to the UK and this project. The models cover a wide range of factors that may influence student integration and retention. Some models focus on one aspect such as economic, social, cultural, organisational or psychological reasons for students dropping out while other models adopt multiple influences that might include all of the aspects. Chapter three also explores the strategies that have been adopted by other HEIs to integrate and retain students.

Chapter four discusses the research methods adopted in this study. Thistle College is acknowledged as a case study and the limitations of case study method are explored. Chapter four discusses the research strategy adopted. The researcher reflects on the problems and context of the data collection. A number of methods used for collecting data are discussed, justifying the choice of methods; these involved interviews, emails and questionnaires. Minitab was used for analysing the questionnaire data and grounded theory was adopted as the technique for working with the interview data.

Chapter five presents an analysis of the questionnaire and interview data. The analysis provides a number of related themes linked to student integration.

Chapter six discusses the main themes from chapter five and their implications for the College and its approach to managing student integration.

Chapter seven makes recommendations for the College to adopt to improve integration. Chapter seven also considers areas for further research.

Chapter 2

Background

Over the last twenty years Government policies have increasingly influenced the nature of UK higher education. Since the Dearing report in 1997 there has been a focus on widening the social mix of students entering higher education. The Government has set a target of 50 per cent participation rate in higher education of the 18-30 year olds by 2010. In Scotland the Scottish Executive has indicated the need for the development of national competitiveness and wealth through an educated workforce, a need that mirrors the policies and views expressed by the UK Government.

In 2001 Wendy Alexander, the minister for enterprise and life long learning started a review of the Scottish Higher Education by launching a consultation paper (Scottish Executive, 2001) focusing on the role and performance of the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC). At that time the number of students in higher education had risen dramatically from 180,000 in 1980-81 to 260,000 in 1999-2000. During 1999-2000 the proportion of school leavers taking up full time education opportunities grew. The participation index for young people under 21 stood at nearly 48%. Even though there was an increase in numbers there was no change in the proportion of students entering HE from the poorer socio-economic groups. In 1999-2000 over 42,000 students graduated from HEIs in Scotland, an increase in 9% from the previous year.

A second consultation paper (Shaping our Future, 2002, p.7) looked at the medium to long term objectives and priorities for the HE sector in Scotland. Wendy Alexander stressed the need to 'identify how the investment in the delivery of HE can most effectively maximise the personal, social and economic benefits of teaching and

research over the medium to long term, and support a culture of challenge, innovation and partnership in and beyond HE institutions'. The terms maximise and investment imply the Scottish Executive would be measuring the performance of HEIs in their ability to be efficient and effective with the resources provided. HEIs must now collect and record information on completion rates and these would be used to measure efficiency. According to Bennett (2003) the estimated cost to the UK tax payer for non-completion was between £91,000,000 and £200,000,000. The third consultation paper (Scottish Executive, 2004) explored the challenges facing higher education. The third review considered resources and the impact of tuition fees on the sector and how this might influence student participation in HE. The review considered the competitiveness of the Scottish HE sector and this included the ability to attract and retain students.

In October 2005 the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) replaced both the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC), a move that simplified funding. The SFC corporate plan for 2006-2009 provides the following vision statement 'A more dynamic, entrepreneurial and internationally competitive Scotland, whose people are amongst the most skilled and educated of any of our competitors, and whose colleges and universities are world-class contributors to economic, social and cultural development', (Scottish Funding Council, 2006, p.2). This vision statement provides a good indicator of the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Funding Council's view of the role of HE in Scotland. The investment in HE and the drive for widening student participation mean there will be focus on non-completion and withdrawal rates. It can be assumed that pressure will be placed on HEIs to improve student retention. The Scottish Executive Statistics Publication (2007)

on Students in Higher Education at Scottish Institutions during the period 2005-06 indicates the following student participation trends:

- In 2005-06 there were, in total, 285,180 HE students at Scottish HEIs and Further Education Colleges (FECs), an increase of 3% since 2004-05. Study at HEIs increased whereas fewer students were enrolled on HE courses at colleges; 82% of students studied at HEIs, 18% at FECs in 2005-06. Student numbers have increased by 10% since 1999-2000.
- There were more female students (160,765) in Scottish HE than males (124,415). The gender gap has widened since 1999-2000, but has stabilised in the last year.
- 54% of students were aged under 25. 79% of first degree students fell into this category, while the majority (53%) of post graduate students were aged 25-39. The proportion of students studying below degree level was greatest amongst those aged 21 and under.
- Entrants to HE from deprived areas of Scotland are over-represented in colleges by 2 percentage points and under-represented at all classes of universities. This is most noticeable in specialised and ancient universities.
- 235,965 Scottish domiciled students currently follow an HE course at an institution anywhere in the UK, 222,400 at Scottish institutions (including 13,955 at The Open University), 12,550 in England, 230 in Northern Ireland and 790 in Wales, including HE students at colleges.
- There are 21,145 English, 5,195 Northern Irish and 650 Welsh students currently studying at Scottish HEIs, representing increases in English and Welsh students of 5% and 4% respectively since 2004-05 and a decrease in Northern Irish students of 3% over the same period.

- The number of students entering HE courses showed similar trends as the overall number of students at HE courses. Entrants have increased by 3% to 142,190 since 2004-05, a rise of 7% since 1999-00. 46% of entrants are in programmes of study below degree level, a decrease of 4 percentage points since 2004-05.

Overall the trend appears to be that student numbers are increasing although entrants from deprived areas are still under represented in HE. The non-completion rate from UK universities has remained constant at 17% up until 2003 according to Christie *et al.* (2004). So the challenge is still to improve on student retention. Certainly it should be assumed that there will always be non-completers who drop out from the system and this is not necessarily a bad thing because students can still gain from the experience and some non-completers do return.

Thistle College

Thistle College was established in 1972. The College is based in the Lanarkshire region in the West of Scotland with a population of 633,046. The College was re-designated as a Higher Education Institution in 2001. The College has 3,600 students and these tend to live in the local area. The College is structured with four academic schools – Business, Social Studies, Science and Technology, and Health. The College offers a wide range of degrees in partnership with other HEIs. Employment figures indicate that 73% of the students who graduate from the College remain in the local area.

The researcher works in the Business School of Thistle College and funding is linked to the number of students recruited and retained. The HEI has recognised that student

recruitment numbers are falling and that it is important to retain existing students and if possible articulate them into other courses. The HEI projected student numbers to increase to 4,600 in the session 2007-2008.

The type of students recruited by the HEI tends to have lower entry qualifications than other HEIs in the West of Scotland and need more support throughout their studies. The HEI is also attempting to implement Government policies on social inclusion and this means that it is attracting students who might be particularly difficult to retain. These students are more at risk to drop-out because they tend to have had a poor educational experience at school, they live at postal codes which are designated areas of social deprivation, will come from a low income family and will in most cases be the first person from their family to enter into higher education. Integration and retention policies/strategies currently adopted include:

- 1) Student induction week for all new and existing students.
- 2) Student support provided by guidance tutors, course leaders, lecturing staff and student welfare services.
- 3) Bridging courses to enable students to move from Higher National programmes onto degree programmes.
- 4) Study skills delivered by lecturing staff.
- 5) The Business School arranges staff and student social events.

- 6) Student attendance monitored and acted upon.
- 7) Student assessment workload reviewed so that it is not heavy.

Research Questions

The research focuses on the following questions.

- 1) Can a new model be developed that explains student integration?
 - Do the existing models explain student integration?
- 2) Why do some students stay on their studies while others leave?
 - Are the main factors internal or external that influence the decision to leave or stay?
 - Is integration and retention a problem only on certain courses or at certain levels in courses?
 - Is it possible to profile students at risk?
- 3) Could the existing integration and retention strategies/policies be improved?

- How are college integration and retention policies put into practice?
- Are there problems in implementing integration and retention policies/strategies?
- How are integration and retention strategies developed?

The research questions have altered since the start of the Ed D. The original research questions focused on retention but as the Ed D progressed the research indicated that student integration is an important aspect of retention. The first research question is – Can a new model be developed that explains student integration? This is not an easy one to answer because many models have been produced but they appear to be limited because they do not address all the factors that influence student integration. The other research questions explore the factors that influence the decision to stay or leave. The sub questions explore the issue that it can be possibly internal factors, external factors or a mix of both that influence the decision to leave. Certainly it can be assumed that some courses might be harder than others, or may have retention problems, because of the subject or skills required. Some students may only be capable of achieving certain academic levels in their studies so to a certain extent they reach a plateau. There have been attempts to profile students and create a template which allows one to identify ‘at risk’ students, but how successful this is as a strategy could be debated. Understanding why students stay on their course is a relevant research question when we consider the difficulties of accessing students who have left their course. As such by answering this question then one might be in a better position to create the environment or conditions that retain students by integrating them into the institution. The research is a case study

and investigating the existing policies and practices is a valid research question because institutions create and implement policies. It is important to understand how these policies are developed and implemented because this might indicate why they are successful or not. As stated earlier in this chapter much of the literature on integration and retention suggests models and these are used as predictors of student behaviour. It is possible that existing models might be adapted to account for what is found in the case study.

Chapter 3

Literature review

Retention

The study of student retention is not a new phenomenon. America has been the source of much of the research on student retention. Berger and Lyon (2005) indicate that there are a number of American contextual influences on retention and this has influenced how it has been thought about, researched and addressed over the last three hundred years. The main contextual influences have been identified as:

- Students – the increasing number, types and diversity.
- Campuses – the increase in number and diversity of campuses.
- Educational roles – evolution of faculty administration.
- Socio-economic – changes in society, demographics, and economic pressures.
- Government policies – in response to retention issues.
- Retention knowledge base – increase in empirical and conceptual knowledge.

Research by McGivney (2003) indicates that the previous list of American influences mirror those in the UK during the 1990s and, as a result retention, and non-completion have become key areas for UK institutions to focus on. Economic, social trends and changes in educational policy in the 1990s have set the context for research on retention and non-completion in the UK. The main UK changes have been identified as the following (McGivney, 2003, pp.3-20):

- More flexible entry requirements, course structures and learning modes.
- Increase in mature student numbers and part-time students.

- Increase in ethnic minorities and women.
- Increase in non-standard students.
- Incorporation of FE colleges and partnerships between FE and HE.
- Economic conditions encouraging students to seek education and training.
- Government policies on education to increase human capital.
- Increase in issues relating to student debt and financial support.
- Increase in part-time work and how it interferes with students' achievement and completion rates.

The above changes are also evident in the HE sector in Scotland from the work carried out by Knox (2005), Christie *et al.* (2004), Prescott and Simpson (2004), and McCausland *et al.* (2004).

Berger and Lyon (2005) indicate the conceptualisation of retention has not been consistent in the USA and that various aspects of student retention have interested researchers and educationalists over a period of time. The terminology used by researchers and educators gives an insight into how the study of retention has developed and what the themes have been. The earliest studies in America on student retention began in the 1930s and developed slowly up to the 1960s. Berger and Lyon (2005) cite the following descriptors that have been applied to the study of student retention such as student mortality (McNeely 1937; Gekowski and Schwartz 1961), college dropouts (Summerskill 1962; Spady 1970; Tinto 1975), student attrition (Sexton 1965; Panos and Astin 1967; Pantages and Creedon 1978; Tinto 1993), college retention (Iffert 1957; Tinto 1990; Berger 2002; Braxton and Mundy 2002), and student persistence (Berger and Milem 1999; Berger 2002). The terms are related but not synonymous. Table 3.1

below provided by Longden (2002, p.9) indicates how the terms can be distinguished and includes explanations of other terms that are frequently used in retention literature.

Table 3.1: Terminology used in literature relating to retention

Label	Type of Leaving	Comment
Attrition	unclear	Pejorative, cold, financial, quasi-objective
Drop out	voluntary	Pejorative, implies failure
Failure	involuntary	Initiated by the university – unlikely to return
Interruption	voluntary	Possibly - most accurate, implies the future return to study
Leaving early	voluntary	implies leaving without return
Non-Achievement	unclear	Measure against qualification gained
Non-completion	voluntary	Inverse relationship with retention rate
Non-persistence	voluntary	Unable to stay on the course
Stop out	voluntary	American terminology not widely used in UK
Survival	unclear	Negative; challenge; competitive
Suspension	voluntary	Ambiguous future plans – temporary departure
Wastage	unclear	Pejorative – implies student gained nothing
Withdrawal	voluntary	Neutral – no future plan for HE defined

From the above list we can see the wide range of terms available and the possibility for confusion. McGivney (2003, p.21) indicates this is a major problem for studying student withdrawal and retention in the UK because there are a variety of ways in which students can fail to complete their course. It is also problematic because of the different ways the FE, HE sectors, funding bodies and individual institutions define and calculate student non-completion. Therefore it becomes difficult to make comparisons between institutions based on official statistics. The result is that the retention figures and statistics could be misleading unless you know how they have been created. McGivney (2003) indicates common terms used by institutions are: wastage, exits, attrition,

withdrawal, non-persistence, non-completion and non-continuation. These terms are often defined in different ways and this adds to the confusion especially if a blanket term is used like 'dropout'. Kember (1995) illustrates a number of potential withdrawal routes a student might follow such as: non-starter, non-continuer, formal withdrawal, academic failure and transfer to other programmes.

McGivney (2003, p. xi) states a number of challenges facing institutions such as: defining the problem, there is no nationally agreed definition of non-completion; the failure of some institutions to adapt to a more diverse range of students; inadequate provision of information and preparation of students before they engage in HE; the need for financial support, especially students taking low level qualifications; widening participation.

Integration and retention models

There are a number of models suggested to explain student integration and retention. Braxton and Mundy (2002) define student retention as an ill-structured problem. It is therefore assumed that a number of strategies will be required to resolve an ill-structured problem because there is no single solution and this means there is a need to look at a multi-theoretical approach to understanding the problem. Researchers have attempted to understand student retention for a number of years by adopting a single theoretical approach. Cabrera, Stammen, and Hansen (1990) considered the economic aspects and how they influenced student retention, in particular the ability of students to pay their way through college or university. Becker (1964) links the economic argument to human capital theory which considers the returns to be gained by an individual investing their time, money and energy in education. Braxton (2003) indicates students

will leave if they perceive the costs exceed the benefits of attending college or university, and these findings support the work of Becker (1975), Tinto (1986) and Cabrera *et al.* (1990). Bennett (2003) found that financial hardship was the strongest influence on the student stay/quit decision and this supports the points put forward by Braxton (2003).

Organisational influences on student integration and retention have been studied by researchers, in particular the role of organisational structure and organisational behaviour, (Tinto, 1986). Bean (1980, 1983) adapted Price and Mueller's (1981) model of employee turnover in the work place and applied it to student turnover in colleges and universities. Bean (1980, 1983) puts forward a number of variables that influence student satisfaction which in turn influence students' intention to leave. The list below indicates the variables included in the Bean model which are stated as having positive influences on integration and retention, although it could be argued that some of the variables in the list could also have a negative influence on integration and retention.

- Routinisation.
- Participation.
- Instrumental communication.
- Integration.
- Distributive justice.
- Grades.
- Practical value.
- Development.
- Courses.
- Membership in campus organisations.
- Marriage (kinship responsibility).
- Opportunity to change course.

Bean makes the assumption that students have the same motivation as workers and this is unrealistic because they may be motivated to be associated with the organisation for different reasons. However the model provides some useful categories that can be

linked to student satisfaction. Satisfaction is a theme developed by Prescott and Simpson (2004) in their study of student motivation. They contend that the best indicator that students are not satisfied is when they stop attending classes, but by that stage the student might be lost to the HEI, so attendance monitoring is seen as a suitable strategy. Prescott and Simpson (2004) used Herzberg's (1976) hygiene factors that relate to motivation in the workplace and applied them to student retention by identifying the factors that must be fulfilled for students to progress satisfactorily in an HEI. One factor was poor integration due to late enrolment, so it is obvious that connecting with the student peer group is key and the factual information provided for late inductees, although useful, does not provide this. Lack of information (concerning e.g. timetables, class location and tutorial groups) was cited as another factor which caused dissatisfaction. A related factor was timetable clashes with 'personal arrangements'; students have to fit part-time work and family commitments around their timetable. Submission dates and assessments due in the same week were seen as a student hygiene factor and one that was compounded by poor time management. Prescott and Simpson (2004) applied Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to the evolution of students' expectations to create a Student hierarchy of needs that included Herzberg's motivators and hygiene factors, (see figure 3.1, p.18). Certainly the motivation theories proposed by Maslow (1943), Alderfer (1972), Herzberg (1976), Vroom (1964), and Porter and Lawler (1968) could provide some conceptual underpinning to understanding student motivation. 'The underlying concept of motivation is some driving force within individuals by which they attempt to achieve

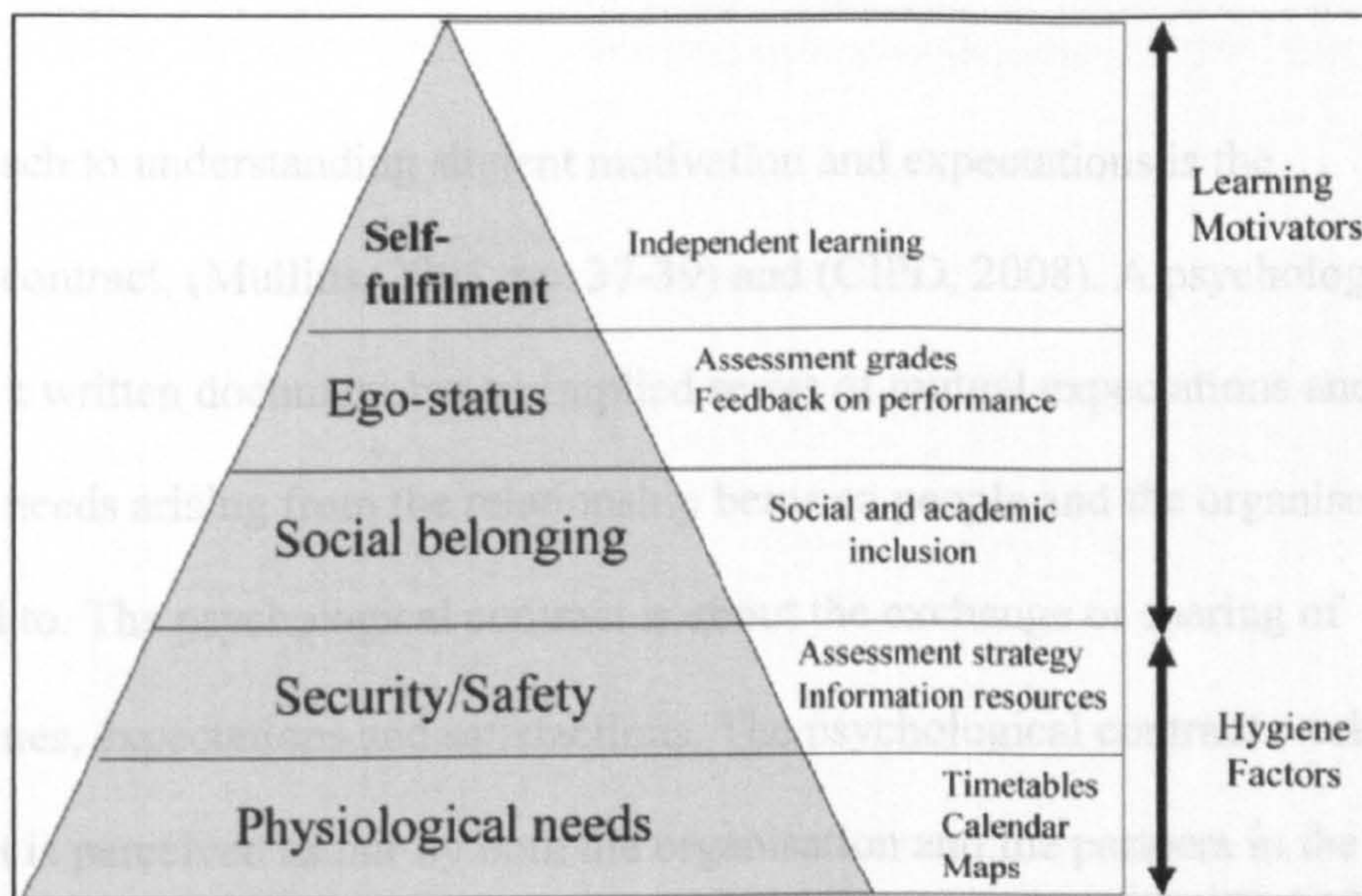


Fig 3.1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs amended by Prescott and Simpson (2004)

some goal in order to fulfil some need or expectations', Mullins, (2005, p. 471). Adams' (1965) equity theory also has some validity when we consider that students expect to be treated the same, and that students are interested in social relationships so expect to be treated fairly by lecturers. Categorising motivation into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation also helps to understand the elements that may go into motivating students and understanding why they withdraw or stay on course. Extrinsic motivation is linked to 'tangible' rewards like salary, conditions of work and promotion. Intrinsic motivation relates to 'psychological' rewards such as the opportunity to use your abilities, achievement, positive recognition, being treated in a caring manner and the desire to learn for the sake of learning. The Byrne and Flood (2005) study on accounting students indicates career and educational aspirations are the reason why they go to university, so they are driven by a mix of extrinsic and intrinsic goals. Rhodes and Nevill (2004) indicate that student satisfaction and dissatisfaction impact on motivation, morale and social integration influence retention. They found that there were a number of factors that influenced students, these related to teaching and learning, debt and money concerns, academic workload and support.

Another approach to understanding student motivation and expectations is the psychological contract, (Mullins, 2005, pp. 37-39) and (CIPD, 2008). A psychological contract is not a written document but an implied series of mutual expectations and satisfaction of needs arising from the relationship between people and the organisation they are linked to. The psychological contract is about the exchange or sharing of beliefs and values, expectations and satisfactions. The psychological contract works on the basis that it is perceived as fair by both the organisation and the partners in the individual contract. The psychological contract could be a useful model to understand and set out the expectations of students and the institutions they have decided to study in.

Stalker (2000) indicates that successful companies are those that can balance the unwritten needs of their employees with the needs of the company. Stalker states that such companies use a simple formula of Caring, Communicating, Listening, Knowing and Rewarding. If we put this formula into an academic context then: Caring would be genuine concern for the students and staff in the institution; Communicating – would be indicating what the institution was trying to achieve; Listening – hearing not just the words but what lies beneath the words (listening to students); Knowing – the students and staff who work in the institution, their desires and ambitions; Rewarding – recognising performance and raising morale. This has some validity when we consider that students' motives, expectations and preparation for education affect their approach to learning tasks and how they adjust to the wider HE environment (Byrne and Flood, 2005).

Research by McInnis (2003) on Australian students indicates they now expect the university to fit around their lives rather than them fitting their lives around the university. Laing *et al.* (2005) indicate there is a need to manage the expectations of students, and if anything this is about managing the relationship between the institution and the students.

Harrison (2006) indicates that a negative experience or dissatisfaction within a course or institution is not the only dimension to student withdrawal because there are students who stay on course despite having negative experiences. Interestingly Harrison (2006) proposes that an alternative retention model should be considered, one that is based on student persistence rather than withdrawal. The model proposed is based around the concept of a network of academic, social and personal linkages of varying strengths that bind the student to the institution. Thus a student choosing a wrong course may persist because of the social network they have at the university. This proposal has some merit when we consider the earlier hygiene factors discussed and the need for students to integrate with their peer group so they are not isolated, so it is clear that networks are important and worthy of further investigation.

Tinto (1986, 1993) indicates that there are psychological explanations for understanding student departure. These psychological explanations include academic aptitude, personality traits and motivational states. Baird (2000) indicates that it is possible to distinguish between the psychological processes and characteristics of students who remain in education and those who depart, and that this happens at a number of levels, namely the student level and the organisational (university or college) level.

Bean and Eaton (2000) integrated four psychological theories into a model of student departure. The model looks at student entry characteristics such as beliefs, previous behaviour, and normative beliefs, and considers how these shape students' views of their institutional environment. How students interact with their institutional environment creates psychological processes that influence students' motivation. These psychological processes include aspects like positive self-efficacy and reduced stress. Bean and Eaton propose that students experience ongoing adjustments to these psychological processes as they engage with the institutional and external environments which may lead to academic and social inclusion / integration and identification with and loyalty to the institution. This also leads to the decision to remain with the institution. This model has links with the longitudinal model proposed by Tinto (1975) and the point that students experience a 'motivational journey' as they progress through their studies.

Astin (1999, p. 519) considers retention in terms of student involvement. Astin defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to the academic experience". Astin's theory has five propositions. The first claim is that student involvement can be generalised or specific. Generalised involvement relates to the overall student experience, specific involvement relates to student activities like preparing for an exam or test. The second claim is that involvement is a continuum which is specific to each student. The third claim made by Astin is that involvement has qualitative and quantitative aspects. The fourth claim is that the quality and quantity of student involvement in an educational programme has a direct influence on the personal development and student learning associated with that educational programme. The last claim is that the effectiveness of an institution's

educational policy and practice can be judged by the ability of the policy and practice to increase student involvement. Astin makes some valid points on academic involvement but there is also a need for students to have social involvement and this element should be considered; certainly it is recognised by Tinto (1975).

Braxton (2000) and Tinto (1986) also indicate there is a sociological perspective to understanding student retention and they contend that there are influences on retention related to social structure and social forces. Typical influences include student peers, family socio-economic status, support from significant others, and mechanisms of anticipatory socialisation. The influence of social factors on students and their impact on student attrition are also supported by Yorke and Thomas (2003), Cooke *et al.* (2004), Rhodes and Nevill (2004) and Bennett *et al.* (2007).

Bean and Metzner (1985) studied non-traditional student attrition. Their model indicates a number of factors influence student retention such as academic performance, intent to leave, previous performance, and educational goals.

Bean and Metzner (1985) also indicate that there are environmental variables which have a greater impact than academic factors on the adult students' decisions to leave. These environmental variables include finance, employment hours, encouragement from outside the institution, family commitments and responsibilities, and course availability. Bean and Metzner (1985) state that these environmental factors can compensate for weak academic support. The writers also contend that the importance of each academic and environmental factor will differ between subgroups such as women, older students, ethnic minorities, part-time students and academically unprepared students. These

findings are supported by Kember (1999), Carney *et al.* (2005) and Lowe and Gayle (2007). If we consider that these environmental influences might be unique for each institution and student, then we can see that Braxton and Mundy (2002) may have a valid point when they state that retention is a complex problem.

Another approach to understanding influences on student integration and retention relates to the concept of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (1973). This concept has been applied to the student departure process by Berger (2000). Bourdieu (1973) refers to cultural capital as a symbolic resource such as informal interpersonal skills, manners, linguistics and educational credentials that an individual can use to maintain or advance their social status. Berger (2000) contends that students have varying levels of cultural capital and educational institutions also possess cultural capital. Educational institutions exhibit cultural capital in their status or perceived success by students, also evidenced by the institution's selection processes. Berger indicates that there needs to be a match between a student's cultural capital and that of the educational institution. Berger makes four claims: 1. Institutions with the highest level of cultural capital have the highest retention rates; 2. Students with higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to stay in an institution, and by this Berger means all types of educational institutions; 3. Students with high levels of cultural capital will stay, especially if the institution has a high level of cultural capital; 4. Students with low levels of cultural capital are most likely to stay with an institution that has low levels of cultural capital.

It is possible to identify with the propositions put forward by Berger especially when we consider the recruitment and selection processes used by the traditional universities, and the ranking of universities and colleges by the educational media which suggest

educational elitism. However, Berger is making assumptions about what motivates students and the reasons students have for attending a particular institution. The propositions put forward by Berger appear to be another piece of the puzzle in understanding student integration and retention.

Other writers such as Kuh and Love (2000) have also considered the cultural perspective and how this relates to student retention. Kuh and Love (2000, p.201) provide eight propositions that link the students' cultural background with the culture of their peer group and how this influences the decision to stay or prematurely leave the institution. Kuh and Love (2000) indicate that the college experience, including a decision to leave college, is mediated through a student's cultural meaning-making system. The student's cultural background mediates the importance attached to attending college and earning a college degree. Having knowledge of a student's culture(s) of origin and culture of immersion is needed to understand a student's ability to successfully negotiate the institution's cultural milieu. The probability of persistence is inversely related to the cultural distance between a student's culture(s) of origin and culture of immersion. Students who traverse a long cultural distance must become acclimated to dominant cultures of immersion or join one or more enclaves. The amount of time students spend in their culture of origin after matriculating is positively related to cultural stress and reduces the chances they will persist. The likelihood of a student who will persist is related to the intensity of one's socio-cultural connections to the academic programme and to affinity groups. Students who belong to one or more enclaves in the cultures of immersion are more likely to persist, especially if group members value achievement and persistence.

Kuh and Love (2000) have identified some key elements in the theory but again it is evident that student integration is a complex issue and cultural aspects are only one of the influences. Yorke and Thomas (2003) studied retention in under-represented student groups and state that there are a number of factors that could have a positive impact on integration. These factors included an institutional climate that is seen as supportive and 'friendly', a need for support during the first year of study, an emphasis on formative assessment in the early phase of programmes, a need to recognise the social dimension in learning activities, the recognition that the pattern of students' engagement in higher education was changing, and the need to respond to these changing patterns. Yorke and Thomas (2003) indicated that an institution needed to have a deep commitment to student engagement, one that was institutionally wide to maximise student success.

Another view of the organisation and its role in retention is that provided by Thomas (2002). Thomas argues that despite the challenges facing students, many persist and complete their course; the reason for this being the students feel they fit in and that their social and cultural practices are appropriate. Thomas explores the role of the 'institutional habitus' in student retention. The term 'institutional habitus' is adopted from the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and can be understood as the influence of culture, values, norms, practices and behaviours embedded in the institution that impact on the individual who interacts with the institution. An example of this is the relative priority assigned to research and teaching and how the tension between the two might impact on the relationship between staff and students. The relationship the student has with the institution is important and if the institutional habitus is inclusive and matches the student's habitus they will feel they belong, which in turn will lead to retention. So it is important for HEIs to understand different institutional practices and

how these impact on students’ feeling of acceptance. This is also supported by Yorke and Thomas (2003). Certainly the reasons for student persistence are worthy of further investigation when we consider how similar challenges can cause some students to dropout while others will persist.

Tinto’s interactionalist theory (1975) on student departure offers a model that covers all of the previous elements.

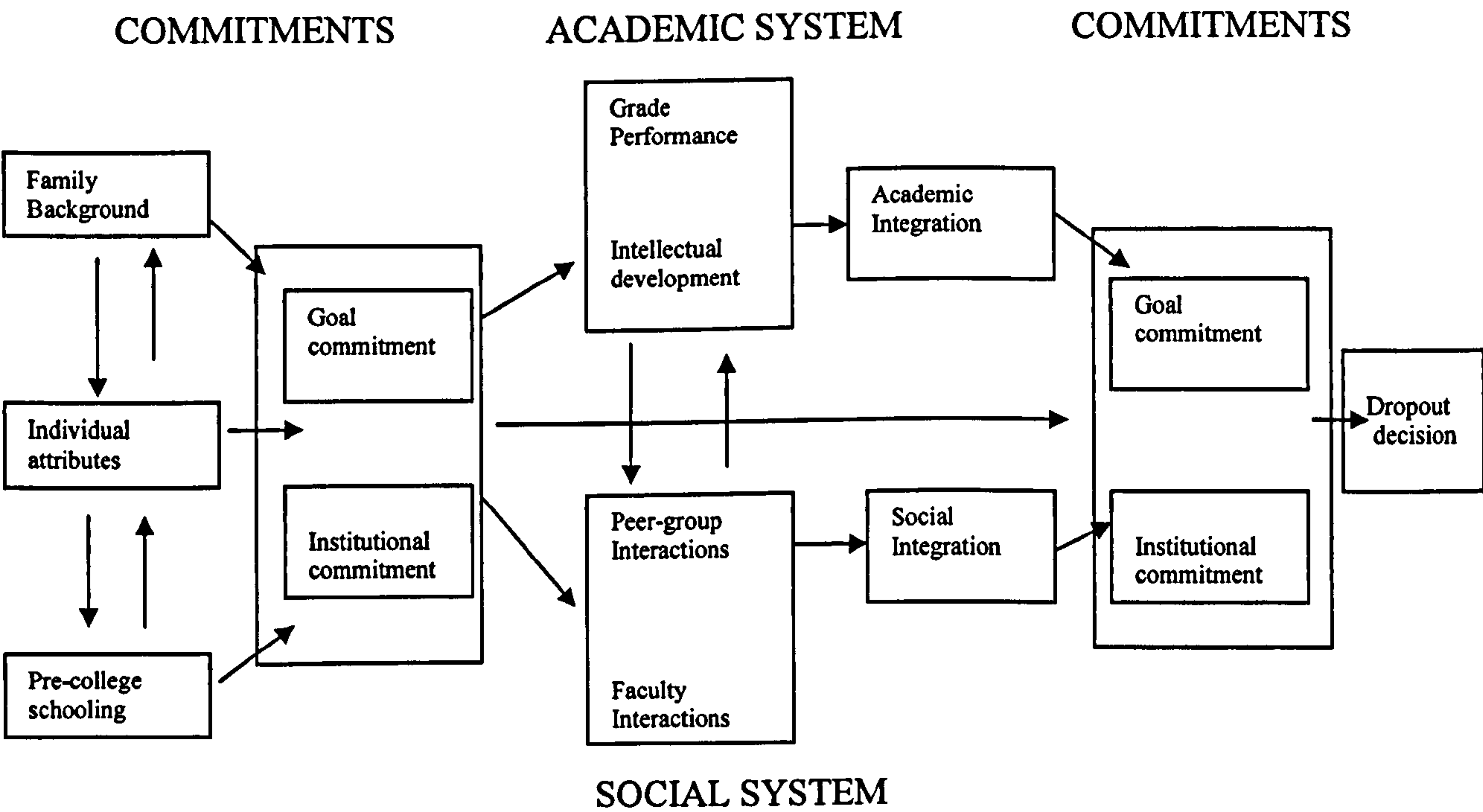


Figure 3.2: Longitudinal Interactionalist Model, a conceptual schemata for dropout from college (Tinto, 1975, p.95)

The Tinto model (fig 3.2) holds a prominent position in the field of retention as it has been the most studied and critiqued, which is evident from the 775 citations observed by Braxton *et al.* (2004). Tinto expanded on the work carried out by Spady (1970) that connected Durkheim’s (1951) theory of suicide to the study of student persistence. Tinto (1975) states that student departure is a longitudinal process due to the meanings students give to their formal and informal interactions with their educational institution.

These interactions happen between the student and the institution's academic and social systems.

From the Tinto model it is clear that there are a number of characteristics a student will possess such as family background, pre-college schooling experiences and individual attributes and that these will influence their initial commitment to a college or their decision to leave a college. Tinto indicates that these characteristics will also influence the commitment to graduate and their level of integration into the college social and academic systems. Tinto states students might achieve structural integration through meeting college standards but they might not achieve social integration because this happens at different levels, institutional and sub-cultural. Tinto proposes that students with a greater level of academic integration will have a greater level of commitment to the goal of graduating. Also the greater the level of social integration then the greater the commitment to the college. Tinto also proposes that the student's initial level of commitment influences the level of subsequent commitment to the college and graduation. The model has been revised to include the influences of financial resources, the influence of external factors like family and work, and the student's classroom experiences, (Tinto, 1986, 1993).

The Tinto model has come under attack from interactionists who state the model makes assumptions about how students reach dropout decisions and Tinto did not test out these assumptions (McKeown *et al.*, 1993). The model has generated many empirical studies and the findings have been supportive, however few studies have tested the model as a whole, only parts of it. At present there is no evidence to support or disprove the model as a whole, there is only partial support for some of the model components. Another

problem is that some research is only supportive of the model for certain sub-populations and the model loses some of its power to explain attrition depending on academic institution students attended (Pascarella and Chapman, 1983). Brunsden *et al.* (2000) contend that Tinto's model is too vague and at the same time over ambitious in its attempt to cover everything. Tinto acknowledges his model is limited in that it does not apply to 'commuting students'. According to Brunsden *et al.* (2000) any theory on dropout should be developed from research on the student experience and the context in which they make decisions. So it appears that there is much more research to be done before we can adopt the Tinto model as it stands but it is clear the model provides a useful framework for research. Thomas and Quinn (2007) also indicate that rather than one single factor influencing first year students to withdraw from a course it is the case that it is a combination of factors. The main reasons can be categorised as inappropriate information to make course choice; poor transition to HE; unclear academic expectations and lack of guidance; insufficient access to support; alienation and isolation; too many other commitments; and financial pressures. The list provided by Thomas and Quinn (2007) contrasts with the findings of Yorke and Longden (2007) who indicate eight risk factors that can lead to students considering withdrawing from their studies. Yorke and Longden (2007) state the greater the number of risk factors encountered by a student then the more likely the student will be to drop out.

Integration and retention strategies

From the discussion so far it is evident that the problems of student integration and retention are not straightforward because there are a number of inter-related reasons why students might leave a course, Woodley *et al.* (1987) and Yorke (1997).

In the longitudinal model of student departure Tinto (1975, 1978) provides a useful framework to understand the strategies that have been developed to address student integration and retention. The following list includes some of the strategies adopted by colleges and universities, McGivney, (2003), Clift (2003) and Taylor (2005):

- Supporting students before they apply.
- Pre-entry guidance.
- Entry tests and screening students.
- Pre-induction.
- Induction.
- Bridging courses between school and FE colleges, FE colleges and HE institutions.
- Guidance.
- Attendance monitoring.
- Streaming students.
- Mentor schemes.
- Peer support, peer mentoring.
- Self-help groups or study groups.
- Adjustments to teaching methods / approaches.
- Curriculum development.
- Student support services.
- Assessment approaches.
- Academic support – personal tutoring.
- Targeted support for minority groups.
- Developing the institutional environment.

The above list gives an impression of a number of independent strategies but on examination it can be seen that they have common links and some are subsets within main strategies. So it is possible to put them under four main headings provided by McGivney (2003): Pre-course contact and transition, on-course support, academic support, and student support services. The other point that can be drawn from the list is that each institution will adopt what it feels to be the most appropriate strategies to meet the needs of its students. Therefore strategies that work for one institution will not necessarily work for another. This has links with contingency theory which states “there is no one best way to organise” because the characteristics of the environment will differ for each organisation, (Burns and Stalker, 1961). This mirrors the earlier point

made by Braxton and Mundy (2002) that student integration and retention are ill-structured problems, so the solution will require different strategies and they will be customised to each institution and perhaps may need adjustment for each new cohort of students.

Pre-course contact and transition

Pre-course contact

Clift (2003) indicates a number of pre-course initiatives instituted by departments within the University of Manchester and UMIST. These initiatives include open days, open evenings, provision of master classes, provision of workshops, dedicated school and college liaison officers, the educational profiling of students to enable realistic targeting of schools. All of these strategies are linked to identifying and informing students and essentially providing realistic expectations of what to expect from their student experience. Interestingly each department had its own approach to pre-course contact. Kember (1995) builds on the work of Tinto and states that there is a need for 'normative congruence', which is the degree of fit between the students' and institutions' expectations of each other. If there is a degree of mismatch between the expectations then the student may fail to integrate into the academic or social dimensions of student life.

Pre-guidance

McGivney (1998, 2003) indicates pre-guidance as an important aspect to retaining mature students. The problems cited by McGivney concerning mature students who enter education through non-traditional routes are not applicable to students who enter

education through the traditional routes. The work of McGivney is relevant in this research because Thistle College has been targeting mature students, part-time students and adult returners over the last six years.

The approaches used for guidance and student support or teaching and learning might influence students' views of a course and make them decide that it is not for them. The work carried out by Woodley *et al.* (1987) on the reasons why students leave their course is supported by Yorke (1997) who conducted research across six HEIs and found the most significant factors in non-completion to be:

- Incompatibility between students and their course or institution. The student does not identify with the course content, the outcome of the course or the way in which the course is delivered by the institution does not meet the needs of the students or their expectations.
- Lack of preparation for higher education. Students are not able to make the transition into education because they have not realised the commitment, abilities and skills that they will need.
- Lack of commitment to the course. Perhaps due to poor entry guidance the course does not meet the expectations of the student or there may be other outside influences – personal or financial - that distract the student.
- Financial hardship.
- Poor academic progress. The student does not have the ability to do the work.

Booth *et al.* (1994) indicate 30% of mature students in their study relied only on prospectuses and had not sought advice before entering higher education. Kember (1995) advocates the need for providing good pre-entry information and guidance. The solution appears to be a need for students to be provided with more detailed, accurate and unbiased pre-entry information and guidance on the academic demands they will face. This is reinforced by the work carried out in the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) project by Cook *et al.* (2006a). Cook *et al.* found that the use of student entry interviews ranged across the institutions in the project and tended to be aimed at differentiating and selecting well qualified entrants and checking mature students were motivated to complete their course. The STAR project indicates information provided to students prior to entry covered many areas such as accommodation, career, disabilities, entry requirements and in many cases curriculum details were only made available at enrolment. Interestingly the expected workload was not formally communicated to many prospective students. Information available to students on the institutions web sites in the study varied considerably and the uses of it made by the students was unknown. So there is a need for better communication with prospective students and setting expectations early on when we consider that students really need to know what the workload might be and that the curriculum is a relevant one for them. There is a need for more openness from the institutions so that students can make a more informed choice. This openness includes the student life style and courses described. A better approach to setting expectations and information provision is the strategy of forming close links with feeder institutions. This also aids student integration and retention because it ensures the students are well informed and prepared for the move to higher education.

Entry tests and screening

Tests are used by some institutions to identify 'at risk' students and students who need to develop their study skills. Martinez (1997) indicates initial student assessment can lead to improved retention and help in curriculum planning. Munn *et al.* (1992) indicate non-completion might be reduced for engineering students if they are warned they will require recent background knowledge and appropriate skills, and that staff should try to assess the applicant's background knowledge and its applicability to the course. Clift (2003) indicates some institutions will use pre-induction questionnaires as a skills audit and this gives an indication of the students' needs before they start on their programme. According to Martinez (1997) there is no real agreement on the appropriate tests to use or if instruments should be in-house or sourced from commercial providers.

Induction and transition

Bourner and Barlow (1991) indicate that induction strategies aid integration and retention if they are designed so that the student gets more value out of the educational experience. From the Tinto (1975) model it is clear that integration is important so the transition into college or university requires an induction programme that integrates students. Induction procedures should provide students with an awareness of facilities (social areas/aspects, library, support services, etc); study skills development; an introduction to staff teaching their course; an appreciation of what workload to expect and the opportunity to discuss study options. Cook *et al.* (2006a) found that induction happens at a number of levels and that one or two day inductions were the most common. The issue here might be how much information can students retain in an intensive induction. Cook *et al.* (2006a) found that staff were not aware of students'

experiences across all of the induction activities, and staff could only guess at the good practice because induction was not evaluated. So there is a need for evaluation of student induction especially when induction can be construed as compartmentalised. Wilcox *et al.* (2005) indicate that the lack of social integration influences the decision to leave and that making compatible friends is important to provide emotional support.

McGivney (2003) indicates that induction should be seen as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. This point raised by McGivney raises some interesting issues concerning student induction and whether or not institutions reflect on the induction process so that it can be improved. Thomas *et al.* (2005), cited in Cook *et al.* (2006b, p.9) indicates that academic induction should be an extended process with information and activities spread forward throughout the first term so that students are prepared for their studies. An area linked to induction is socialisation which is seen as an essential element in organisational recruitment and when we look at the findings from Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (1999) that it is clear socialisation should be extended to the recruitment and induction of students. The proposal that induction should be an ongoing process fits well with the Tinto longitudinal model in that integration and retention are not just an issue for the start of a programme but throughout a programme. Cook *et al.* (2006a, p.13) make an interesting observation in that the process can be seen as a timeline which is continuous for students but disjointed for academic and non-academic staff who only have a small part to play in it.

The transition period is seen as the first weeks when the student enters the institution and this period is difficult for students if they have not been in education for a while or are adapting to the new study/teaching methods which are different from those

experienced recently at school or within college. Cook *et al.* (2006a) indicated that some induction weeks included a diagnostic test to identify students who might not be prepared for entering higher education. Cook (2006) certainly indicates the potential for transition problems for students entering HE from school. The attributes of school leavers have changed due to the teaching methods used in school. The adoption of deferred assessment schemes, specified content of the curriculum and assessment, and ability to repeat assessments have produced teacher dependent students (being chased for work) and perhaps a risk averse learning culture of “Just tell me what I need to know to pass the assessment”. So prior to entering HE, students are learning without understanding and learning to pass exams. So there is a need for students coming straight out of school to adapt to the new HE culture, a point well made by Kuh and Love (2000).

McGivney (2003) and Clift (2003) indicate that some institutions use mentor schemes and create peer support groups to enable students to cope with the transition into higher education. Clift (2003) states that peer mentoring is not restricted to the transition phase but can cover the academic year and that it is extended to year two students.

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) (1995) indicates that the institutional environment also influences the student withdrawal decision. Therefore, the standard of study and social facilities, ambience, the appearance of the facilities and the resources available to the student are important elements of students’ expectations. Perhaps these institutional elements are important because they are physical and tangible, and provide reinforcement that the decision to enrol is the right one.

On-course support

Kember (1995) states that educational providers need to understand that students' expectations and needs will change as they progress through their programme of study:

'Motivation will vary, often being strengthened towards the end as completion comes into view. Intrinsic interest will differ from module to module. The degree of both academic and social integration will be influenced by changes in student characteristics, development of goal commitment, the nature of courses, support from the institution, events and attitudes in the work, and family and social environments' (Kember, 1995, p.123).

McGivney (2003) indicates that there is a need for sympathetic and supportive staff. According to Kember (1995), this is a particular issue for mature students, non-traditional students and ethnic minority students. These students might find themselves with particular difficulties because the transition and adaptation to college social and academic life are harder for them due to their lack of educational experience, financial responsibilities, and family and cultural commitments. LJMU (1995) indicate that there is a need for good staff student relations. Munn *et al.* (1992) indicate that effective tutor support involves tutors being helpful and approachable, staff-student rapport needs to be an explicit part of course design, treating all students, including mature students, as equals, displaying a genuine interest in students, and providing well-designed materials for students when their course has limited tutor contact. This has links with the work carried out by Taylor (2005) on curriculum development which provides study or other transferable skills. Taylor (2005) also indicates a strong relationship with peers and

especially facilitators (tutors) knowing their students will help with attrition. Lowe and Gayle (2007) in their research on work/life/study balance indicate that the quality of relationships is important and support from family, employees, fellow students and the institution are key for coping. Lowe and Gayle indicate the culture of an institution is important because it needs to promote flexibility and enable staff to have the attributes, attitudes, priorities and values to support students.

On-course support also includes telephone help lines that enable student access (and this could be subject specific), designated staff members for each student group, the creation of groups and encouragement of group cohesion. Many areas discussed in this section overlap with academic and student support services/strategies.

Harley *et al.* (2006) indicate that because every university student has a mobile phone there is the possibility of using text messaging for integrating students socially and academically. Harvey *et al.* found that students in their study used five forms of communication: mobile phone for texting, mobile phone for voice calls; email; landline phones; instant messenger-type programs such as MSN Messenger. Using mobile phones for texting and voice calls were the most frequently used media. The study found that text messaging was effective because the students were not consistent in checking their emails or Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). In the study text messaging was used by the tutors and admin staff to update students on academic and administrative matters, such as deadlines for essays or cancelled lectures. Interestingly general messages sent out to students still came across as a personal communication to the student receiving them, many felt it gave them a sense of belonging. Students also forwarded the messages on to other students in their network. Certainly if students

perceive text messaging as more personal than email then there is scope to build relationships between staff and students, and also get students to identify with their institution leading to integration.

Academic support

Academic integration is a key element of the integration and retention models discussed previously. Kember (1995) states that student academic integration is dependent on the nature, extent and quality of the academic support they receive. Woodley *et al.* (1987) indicate that learning support strategies need to consider the following student aspects:

- Previous level of academic achievement.
- Readiness for the workload / commitment.
- Satisfaction with the institution and programme of study.
- Personal and professional difficulties.
- Readiness for study and ability to study.
- Perceptions of progress.
- The classroom experience.
- Timing of courses and required attendance patterns.
- Persistency of institutional messages indicating value and support.

Academic support includes a number of specific and inter-related strategies. Curriculum and course design are important areas because there is a need to consider the way in which students learn, (Mason, 1989), and it is important to make links with their prior experience and knowledge. Course design needs to consider how to motivate and interest students.

There is a need to consider how the teaching and learning methods match the expectations and experiences of the student. Academic staff may need to adjust their approach to teaching and learning depending on the student group or group members.

Flexible and individualised learning have been considered as approaches to improve student integration and retention. Allowing students to negotiate, control and manage their learning allows them to become responsible for their learning, (Kember, 1995). This requires the tutor to identify student preferred learning approaches, organising time for students to discuss their work, identifying the pace at which students progress and monitoring progression. Programme delivery and the timing of assessments are part of this process and students have indicated that lack of time to prepare and lack of interest in a subject led to student failure, (Scott and Graal, 2006).

Scott and Graal, (2006) indicate that there are a number of reasons for academic failure. Students do not appreciate and misjudge the amount of work/effort needed to stay on course and pass exams. Students are referred to as saying “they went in blind to exams”. The motivation is not there for modules that are not interesting. There is no one to monitor their progress and make them work. So there is a role for tutors to be more sympathetic to the transition issues of new students entering HE.

Academic guidance is best carried out by the tutor according to Munn *et al.* (1992). Certainly guidance is important because it builds on the staff-student relationship and allows the tutor to track the students’ academic progress and agree future objectives. The guidance needs to be in-depth and integrated into the curriculum. The guidance process allows the tutor to refer the student for support services. Some institutions have used attendance monitoring as part of the guidance process.

The development of the students’ study skills is another support strategy. This can be provided using a number of approaches such as drop-in workshops, computer-based

packages, intranet, self-learning packages and separate classes. Munn *et al.* (1992) indicate that academic staff can make assumptions that students are already equipped with the study skills they need and they go on to state that there is an increasing awareness of the value of study skills and their importance to students.

Munn *et al.* (1992) indicate that assessment support is an important strategy. This strategy includes help with examination techniques and essay writing. Mock exams and tests also form part of the assessment support. Formative assessment does not appear to motivate students; unless there are marks to be gained students will behave strategically and put their efforts in to areas where they count, (Cook *et al.*, 2006a). Students appreciate clear guidance on assessments, rapid turnaround in returning assessments and frequent / regular feedback. This point is supported by Young (2000) who found that students found their first assignments problematic. Linked to this was the role of assessment feedback in self esteem particularly for mature students who can have varying levels of self-esteem and the assessment feedback reinforces their self concept. Rhodes and Nevill (2004) suggest that the key stress points for students are induction, post induction and the first assessment. So it can be concluded that feedback and communication are important elements of assessment support. Feedback and communication might be more important for new students entering HE for the first time as they are more at risk from leaving early if they have a poor self concept, or lack commitment to being a student. In the case of non-traditional students all of the previous factors apply and might be compounded by social pressures, (Bennett *et al.*, 2007).

Student support services

McGivney (2003) states there are wide differences between the amount and quality of student support services provided by HE and FE institutions. Payne and Storan (1995) support this view of student services indicating that the FE offers better support.

Strategies employed seem to be developed along two streams. Support for academic staff in the form of training and the development of support materials such as study skills. Secondly support for students in the form of services such as financial support, scribes and equipment for special needs students, careers guidance, counselling and welfare support. The main point from this is that there is a need for HE and FE institutions to develop internal policies and structures to deliver the support students need.

Summary

The literature review indicates most of the research has been based on American institutions indicating a need for more research in the UK. There are a number of models proposed to understand student integration and retention which have been developed solely on economic, organisational, sociological or psychological grounds. The Tinto interactionalist model combines a number of factors that attempt to explain why students drop out and holds a prominent position in the literature. The literature indicates there is a need for academic and social integration if institutions wish to retain students. The solution for improving student integration and increasing retention is complex and context specific. Essentially the approach needs to be customised by each institution and perhaps customised for each student.

Chapter 4

Research methodology

Introduction

The research involves the study of students within Thistle College. Therefore because the research is focused on a single institution the case study approach is considered to be an appropriate methodology. The Gillham (2000, p.1) definition of a case study supports the approach:

A case therefore can be an individual: it can be a group such as a family or a class, or an office, or a hospital ward; it can be an institution – such as a children’s home, or a factory; it can be a large-scale community – a town, an industry, a profession.

The research will focus on the Business School which is one of four schools within Thistle College. The research will focus on full-time students in the Business School who are taking three-year programmes leading to a general degree from which successful students could proceed to take an honours degree after four years. One of the benefits of adopting a case study approach is that it looks at real situations and offers the chance to gain insights not easily gained by other research approaches.

Gillham indicates the term ‘case’ is hard to define but could be viewed as:

- a unit of human activity embedded in the real world;
- which can be only studied or understood in context;
- which exists in the here and now;
- that merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw.

So from the above bullet points it is possible to argue that the study of students within Thistle College matches the criteria to be termed a case. This can be justified because the Business School is a part of Thistle College and as such is responsible for the recruitment, integration and retention of business students. The Business School engages with a number of external and internal stakeholders requiring the staff to work across the school boundaries to achieve the school's retention objectives. The research is focused on the current integration and retention strategies in the school and this requires an understanding of the context in which the strategies are delivered.

Similarly, Yin (1984, p. 13) argues that the case study research method is useful:

...when the aim of a research is to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

Certainly boundaries are an issue with the case study approach and the Business School falls into this when the research is only on this part of the college, and the school is part of the college and viewing the college as a system then it is clear each will impact on the other. In case study research, context is important and this will influence the research in that we need to consider a number of contexts such as political, cultural, historical, economic and social when it comes to understanding the research data.

Adopting the case study approach poses several dilemmas in that the researcher needs to consider the depth versus breadth of case study.

Stake (1995) indicates case study research is concerned with the complexity and nature of the case that is being studied. This observation is in line with the findings of other writers like Gillham (2000, p. 2) who indicate that case study research is an emergent approach:

...you don't start out with a priori theoretical notions (whether derived from the literature or not) – because until you get there and get hold of your data, get to understand the context, you won't know what theories (explanations) work best or make the most sense.

With a case study approach the researcher needs to be aware that there are many sources of information and that everything is initially important, nothing should be turned away, (Burgess *et al.* 2006).

The researcher is aware that case study methodology has its limitations. Denscombe (1998) indicates that the extent to which the findings from a case study can be generalised to other examples depends on how far the case study example is similar to other case studies. Bassey (1981) uses the term 'relatability' rather than generalisability. In his view:

An important criterion for judging the merit of a case study is the extent to which the details are sufficient and appropriate for a teacher working in a similar situation to relate his decision making to that described in the case study. The relatability of a case study is more important than its generalisability.

Gomm *et al.* (2000) back the views put forward by Bassey in that they see that researchers should argue for the general relevance of their research findings. The issue is that the research findings could be relevant to professional practice and they could be useful to others in similar situations even if the findings are not generalisable.

Bassey (1981) puts forward the view:

...that if case studies are carried out systematically and critically, if they are aimed at the improvement of education, if they are relatable, and if by publication of the findings they extend the boundaries of existing knowledge, then they are valid forms of educational research.

Yin (1984) indicates that it really depends on the research design adopted and how far the researcher feels their approach to case study research can be developed to enhance its ability to meet the research design criteria of reliability, replicability and validity.

Bassey (1999, p.52) amends his earlier thoughts and indicates the findings from case study research could be referred to as general statements with built-in uncertainty which he terms 'fuzzy generalisations':

A fuzzy generalisation carries an element of uncertainty. It reports that something has happened in one place and it may happen elsewhere. There is the possibility but no surety.

The fuzzy generalisation concept appears to be a valid one when it comes to recognising the findings of this case study research and how the findings may relate to similar cases.

The researcher sees the case study approach as one in which theory will be generated out of the findings and it will be the emergent process described by Gillham earlier.

Research strategy

Bryman (2001, p.49) indicates the case study approach is associated with qualitative research because researchers tend to favour qualitative methods like participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Bryman agrees that such qualitative methods will certainly enable a detailed examination of a case study. However Bryman also proposes that it is possible to use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods; this is supported by Gillham (2000). The proposed research will use quantitative and qualitative approaches. This approach to the research strategy is also supported by Hammersley (1996) who proposes three approaches to multi-strategy research: triangulation – the use of qualitative research to corroborate quantitative research or vice versa; facilitation – this is when one research strategy is used to aid the research of another research strategy; complementary – this happens when two research strategies are used to investigate different aspects in a study so that the investigation can be dovetailed. So the quantitative and qualitative approaches are designed to complement one another in this research.

Accessing students

Access to student addresses was agreed with the Head of the Business School and initially the researcher used a mail shot to contact 115 students who had dropped out of College during 2004-2005. The mail shot letter contained a stamped addressed envelope and contact details so that students could indicate if they wished to be contacted by email or telephone to discuss their reasons for dropping out. The response was poor and

only 3 students replied. These students were contacted by email and their responses collated. A further mail shot was sent out to 60 students and had no returns. The disappointing returns resulted in a rethink of the data gathering process. It was concluded that accessing students who had left would be very difficult due to their unwillingness to take part. So the student retention question was turned around to focus on the students who were still in Thistle College. Why did these students continue their studies and not drop out? It was considered that by investigating the reasons why students continued in their studies it would lead to clues to why other students had decided to leave.

The approach to data collection focused on student interviews, staff interviews and a student questionnaire. The researcher originally considered video taping the interviews because it would have allowed the data to include visual material that might provide a more accurate picture of the respondents' true feelings by their body language.

However, feedback from interviewees from pilot research in an earlier Open University module E835 indicated that the subject matter was very sensitive and political, and therefore the interviewees would not wish to be videotaped and would almost certainly prefer the anonymity of transcribed interviews.

Student interviews

Initially five interviews were held with students studying in year one and two of the business studies programmes. The researcher did not know any of the students and asked fellow tutors for permission to visit their classes to ask for student volunteers. The researcher explained what the research was for and the benefits that might be gained for the Business School and future students. It was also stressed that the students were

under no obligation to take part, and could change their mind at any time. Students were also informed the interviews would be tape recorded and would be anonymous. A number of students volunteered and agreed to take part. Some students from year three said they did not want to take part because no one listened to what they had said before so there was no point. Interview dates and times were set. Some students did not show up for the agreed interviews. The interviewer had a dilemma in that he felt by following up non-attendance he was harassing students and perhaps coercing them into taking part. It was decided to follow up the students who had missed the interviews to find out if there had been concerns. In most cases the students had forgotten to come or had been unable to attend due to new commitments in College or in part-time work, only one had had second thoughts. From this feedback it was decided with the agreement of the students to start collecting the mobile phone numbers of students who would take part in future interviews. It was also agreed that students would contact the researcher by email or phone if they could not manage or had changed their mind about taking part.

The researcher assumed there would be some interview variability because although the same questions were used in the interviews there would be times when further questions would be asked. The researcher recognised he would need to consider where interviews take place and how this might influence the responses from the interviewees. It was essential at all times to remain conscious of the subjectivity of the individual's point of view and the context in which the interviewee answered questions because the staff member (or student) knew the researcher and might provide the responses they believe the researcher wanted to hear, (Open University, 2001, p.170)

The student interviews took place in an empty classroom rather than the researcher's office because it was felt that it might be intimidating. The classroom was an environment the students were used to being in and perhaps felt safer. At the beginning of each interview the students were given some background to the research and the opportunity to walk away from the interview. Students were provided with an information sheet (appendix 1) indicating that the research being undertaken and a contract (appendix 2) to sign indicating their agreement to take part in the interviews. The contract also indicated that the interview would be confidential and used for research purposes only. The interviews were tape recorded and in all cases the sound quality of the tape recording was checked before the interview took place. Some of the students were apprehensive about their interview being taped and this was more about how they might sound on tape. In each case playing back the sound check actually put them at ease as did telling them that the only person who would hear the tape recording would be the researcher.

The interview was semi-structured and used a set of questions (appendix 3) as a framework. The interviewees were told that the interview would last about 30 minutes but in reality they lasted on average 45 minutes. The interview started with simple scene-setting questions about the student's course and then explored their experiences and challenges faced as a student. It became clear that the process could not be hurried and that the interviewer had to prompt and at times ask for the students to expand on their answers. On reflection the interviewer was conscious that he needed to let the interview flow in whatever area or direction the student decided to go and the interview questions acted as a fluid rather than rigid framework. The tape was switched off at the end of the first few interviews but it was found that in some interviews there was still

more to come and the recorder needed to be switched on again. It seemed that the interviewee was relieved to be finished then felt the need to talk more. Each interview finished with a thank you and a couple of questions about the interview experience? In the third interview that took place, at the end of the interview the researcher's last question to the student was - Was there anything else they wanted to add to what had been discussed? It was really a throwaway comment that led to another 20 minutes of discussion that was unexpected. As a result of this it was decided to ask this question at the end of future interviews and also ensure that the tape was left on.

The initial five interviews were very worthwhile because they forced the researcher to consider the data collection process, and the challenges of collecting interview data. The experience was a learning curve and helped to set down some of the ground rules for future interviews. It was clear that the timing, place, process and context in which the interviews took place were important. All five interviews were transcribed and this proved to be a lengthy process taking approximately four hours for each one. Initially it was considered to arrange for the transcribing to be done by one of the administration staff. However listening to the interviews again helped the researcher get a feel for the interview and dynamics, all of which helped the researcher remember how the interview went. It was felt that much would have been lost by getting the interviews transcribed by another person, including any errors that might creep into the transcribed notes because they misunderstood or misheard what was being said.

Over a four month period a further 27 interviews were held with students in the Business School. Table 3.2 (page 51) provides the list of continuing full-time students interviewed in the research.

Table 3.2 Interviews with full-time continuing students

Name	Gender	Age	Year	Course
Ally	Female	27	1	BA Accounting
Jamie	Male	19	1	BA Business
Jane	Female	18	1	BA Accounting
Sarah	Female	18	1	BA Accounting
Tim	Male	23	1	BA Info Mgt
Tom	Male	17	1	BA Info Mgt
Amy	Female	20	2	BA Business
Ann	Female	22	2	BA Business
Harry	Male	20	2	BA Business
Jim	Male	21	2	BA Business
June	Female	19	2	BA Info Mgt
Lara	Female	19	2	BA Accounting
Lillian	Female	19	2	BA Accounting
Linda	Female	21	2	BA Info Mgt
Rob	Male	19	2	BA Info Mgt
Ross	Male	19	2	BA Business
Sean	Male	19	2	BA Business
Susan	Female	25	2	BA Info Mgt
Ahmed	Male	23	3	BA Business
Becky	Female	20	3	BA Business
Carole	Female	35	3	BA Accounting
Chloe	Female	27	3	BA Business
Holly	Female	33	3	BA Business
Iain	Male	20	3	BA Business
Joe	Male	21	3	BA Business
Kirsty	Female	22	3	BA Business
Lewis	Male	21	3	BA Business
Liz	Female	42	3	BA Accounting
Louise	Female	21	3	BA Accounting
Lynn	Female	30	3	BA Accounting
Michelle	Female	25	3	BA Business
Robert	Male	21	3	BA Business
Sally	Female	21	3	BA Business
Val	Female	22	3	BA Business
Jane	Female	22	4	BA Business

The interviewees were volunteers from years one, two, three and four of the Business School. The same problems of non-attendance appeared again. However, in almost all cases the students eventually got in touch and took part citing changes in their personal plans had meant that they could not take part at the original interview. Most of these interviews took place in an empty office and this proved to be a neutral and quiet setting

compared to the earlier classroom interviews because no one could pass the door and look through the glass. It was a neutral setting because it was not in the researcher's office or a classroom which might be associated with the researcher being in charge or having power over the student. Three interviews took place in a very cramped office because the other office was not available. This small office was private but not as welcoming and it did feel that you were invading each other's personal space. These interviews went well but lack of space was an underlying issue. All of the interviews were audio taped so that the information could be gathered easily and nothing missed. Interviews lasted 45 minutes although some students were quite happy to speak for 70 minutes and became biographical. Field notes were also be made during the interviews, and this allowed the researcher to consider the context in which the interview took place and aspects like body language. The researcher was conscious that sometimes the students appeared to be apprehensive and distracted when notes were being made so note taking was left till after the interview finished. The interviews were semi-structured and this allowed the same questions to be asked and also allowed scope to ask further questions in response to significant replies from the interviewees, which is seen as an advantage by Bryman (2001).

Staff interviews

In May 2005 the researcher carried out interviews with four course leaders and it seemed appropriate to revisit this data and carry out follow up interviews to see if these course leaders had seen any change in the integration and retention strategies or if their attitudes had changed. The researcher felt that a major input into the students' experience in Thistle College came from the academic staff and their interaction with the students, as well as their input into the implementation of the integration and

retention strategies/policies. It seemed very relevant to see the student experience through the eyes of the staff and to get the staff view on why students dropped out or persisted in their studies.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with three senior lecturers and seven lecturers. From this group there was a need to interview six of the lecturers quickly because they were due to take early retirement in June 2008 and had been in the Business School for over 15 years and in two cases for over 20 years. A retiring member of staff from the student support services was also interviewed in June 2008 because he had been the main guidance and student welfare counsellor, and it was assumed he would have knowledge of the difficulties and challenges faced by students. It was also assumed that the academic members of staff would have a wealth of experience, knowledge of the Business School, and would have seen much change in the way students were tutored. They would also have been involved in the implementation of the College integration and retention strategies and would have experience of how successful these were. Interviews also took place in March 2009 with three academic members of staff who were due to retire in December 2009. Interviews were also held with four continuing academic members of staff.

Staff members were contacted and asked to take part in interviews at a time and place that suited them. All but one member of staff agreed to take part in a face-to face interview. This member of staff wished to read through the semi-structured questions before the interview. These questions were emailed and a hard copy also given to the member of staff who answered the questions by email because she wanted to consider their responses to the interview questions. This particular member of staff also

questioned why she had been selected to take part and gave the impression she was being targeted. It was explained that she was under no obligation to take part and that she had been asked to take part because she had been in the Business School a long time and thus had insights to contribute to the research. It was also clearly stated that the interview notes and audio recordings would only be used for research, would be stored in a secure place and no one would be able to identify her from data.

The process of interviewing the staff members followed the same format as that of the students. The research objectives were discussed and the value of their contribution. It was explained that the interviewee could decide to opt out if they wanted, the interview data would be recorded and the data collected would be kept secure and that no one would be able to identify them so they would be safe to make comments and could be as open as they wished. The members of staff who were approaching retirement were keen to take part and the interviews took place in a quiet office over a cup of coffee. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and it was evident that the interviewees felt the need to unburden. Although the interviews have a set of prescribed questions the interviewee responses digressed and reminisced across the experiences the staff had had during their time in College and at times seemed to be therapy session. Perhaps the chance to offload with no comeback and retirement quite soon made the interviewee responses more honest and candid. The interviews with the lecturing staff did not exhibit any power plays in that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee remained friendly and open. One interview with a lecturer was uncomfortable and there was a feeling he was being defensive about how he had run his courses and he had acted out his role, the interview responses were shorter and seemed guarded compared to other staff interview responses that were more likely to go off in tangents. Part of this

interview tension might have been due to the fact he was retiring but felt he was being pushed into early retirement and this came out in some of the interview responses.

Telephone and email interviews

As the research process emerged the researcher felt that there was a need to gather data from students who had withdrawn. There was no guarantee that students would be willing to discuss the reasons for withdrawal from the programme and there was a concern that they might feel the request would be an intrusion on their privacy, so there were ethical issues to be considered before going ahead. It was felt that despite the rich data from the continuing student interviews, gathering data from those who had left would add more to the research and despite the problems contacting these students encountered earlier it was decided to continue to attempt to contact these students. It was considered that it would be worthwhile exploring the views of ex-students who had been away for over a year. It was assumed that their response would be more revealing as they would have had time to reflect on their views of the College and their course.

Access to student's details was agreed with the Head of the Business School. The process of contacting students was difficult because many of the students were now working so were not at home, or had changed their mobile phone numbers. The researcher managed to carry out telephone interviews with 12 full-time students. On phoning the contact number the researcher asked for the student by name and if they came to the phone explained the purpose of the call was to follow up on what they had been doing since they had left College and to find out what their experience had been like as a student. If the student was not in then a message was left that the researcher would call back. The researcher was aware that they could not give away too much

information on the phone when speaking to anyone other than the student because the researcher would not be entirely sure who he was speaking to on the phone and what they knew about the student. The information was personal and the researcher was aware of one case in which a student had failed their re-sit exams and was currently working part-time but not revealing to their parents that they were in academic suspension for a year. On two occasions the parent or partner asked if they could get them to email the researcher back and this resulted in an email interview. The telephone interviews lasted about 20 minutes and the students were quite open in their responses and quite friendly. In some cases they seemed quite pleased to be contacted (to talk) and in the interest being shown in them about their experience. Perhaps this was due to the fact that they were no longer under pressure to be in College. It was decided to persist in this data collection approach right up until August 2009. Table 3.3 (page 57) indicates the details of the students contacted.

Email was also used for follow up questions with students who had been interviewed because it was sometimes hard to contact students due to their time commitments and although they had agreed to one face-to-face interview they did not want tied to follow up interviews. The advantage with the e-mail interviews was that the online discussion was accurately transcribed. Another benefit was that less confident respondents could have their say and it was possible to give the participants pseudonyms thus ensuring anonymity. The problem with an email interview process is that it might be protracted because it is asynchronous and the respondent is more likely to drop out of the process compared to face-to-face interviews. Fortunately the participants did not drop out and the email interviews carried out did not go on unabated but came to a natural end and so the researcher did not appear to be constantly chipping away at the interviewee for more

Table 3.3 Interviews with full-time students who had left the institution

Name	Gender	Age	Year	Course	Reason for leaving
Claire	Female	18	1	BA Business	Not what they thought it would be
Daniel	Male	17	1	BA Info Mgt	Do a different course
Dave	Male	18	1	BA Business	Boring, offered job
Kelly	Female	19	1	BA Business	Did not get on with lecturer, finance problem , course not for me
Morgan	Female	17	1	BA Info Mgt	Did not like the course
Ryan	Male	18	1	BA Accounting	Course was ok, just drifted
Steven	Male	19	1	BA Accounting	Got a job
Dawn	Female	18	2	BA Info Mgt	Finance problem
Gillian	Female	19	2	BA Business	New baby
Kenny	Male	21	2	BA Info Mgt	Offered a job
Lisa	Female	20	2	BA Accounting	Relationship problem
Meg	Female	20	2	BA Business	Illness, poor time management
Sue	Female	19	2	BA Accounting	Felt not for me, too hard
Liz	Female	24	3	BA Accounting	Did not like course, no friends, stress
Margaret	Female	27	3	BA Info Mgt	Illness, couldn't cope with exams
Paul	Male	23	3	BA Business	Travel time, no friends, stress

information. Mann and Stewart (2000, pp.138-139) indicate that it is possible to create a relationship and build trust with the interviewee through frequent e-mails that reassure the participant that their responses are valued. The e-mail interview certainly had a number of other advantages because it was possible to follow up interviewees' answers online and the replies were likely to be considered. The problem with this approach might be that the participants can take a long time to respond and when they do they have had time to think through their responses so the actual response is perhaps not as natural (loss of spontaneity) as it would be if it were offered during a face-to-face discussion. This was certainly an issue with the response from the member of staff who did not wish to be interviewed. Another problem is setting up the e-interviews and the dedication required by the participants, (Selywn and Robson, 1998). This was not an issue in this research because the interviews were relatively short so it was assumed that the level of participant commitment would be sustained, however it was still a concern because the approach was new to the researcher who was aware of how fragile participant commitment might be.

Questionnaire

The research used a questionnaire on existing students to find out if they had ever considered leaving their course of study and what made them remain. The questionnaire was developed and modified from one used by Palmer (2004), (see appendix 4). The questionnaire also asked questions about the reasons for coming to College, student motivation, part-time working, support and family background. The questionnaire was piloted using staff and students to ensure that the questions were clear. Questionnaires were considered to be a useful approach to information gathering because this method can be used to gather a large amount of information and maintain confidentiality.

Questionnaires also have the benefit that they do not take time to administer, everyone is asked the same question and they can be designed so that analysis is relatively simple. When possible the researcher personally administered the questionnaire to students rather than asking tutors to do this because it has been found that staff support is patchy and this can result in poor patterns of responses and information that might not be representative of the student population, (Open University, 2001, pp. 179-180). However in some cases contacting students was a problem and some of the tutors administered the questionnaire. The researcher attempted to reduce the impact of other tutors administering the questionnaire by briefing them and checking there was no confusion over the questions. However, the researcher was conscious that there could still be differing explanations of the same questions given by tutors if students queried them, and that this was an issue to be borne in mind when analysing the data. It was clear that the sample needed to represent students from across the Business School and the number needed to be representative of the student population. After reflection it seemed that the full-time student population was so small it made sense to sample the whole the population. The questionnaire was given out to 280 full-time students, this included certificate, diploma and degree students. The size of the sample population in the study would make the analysis of the results manageable and meaningful. 85 students returned questionnaires, however a member of staff had administered 10 to a group of students from another school.

Research issues

The researcher was conscious of his role in the research process and the fact he could be seen as an insider researcher because he has worked in the Business School since 1993 and has knowledge and experience of its history, culture, systems and relationships.

Much has been written about being an insider or an outsider in qualitative research. The difficulty is that this assumes that a researcher is either one or the other and this view fails to show that it might be possible for an insider researcher to switch to being an outsider or vice versa, or that the researcher might be somewhere in between the two. Certainly work by Le Gallais (2003), Dwyer and Buckle (2009), Breen (2007) and Jaspal (2009) indicate that as a researcher it is possible that one can be both an insider and an outsider during your research. In this research it is evident that the researcher is an insider. Being an insider researcher has benefits in that one is able to access the data, have a rapport with the interviewees, the ability to interact naturally with the group under research and have a knowledge of the setting in which the research will be carried out, (Hodkinson, 2005). Certainly during the data gathering it was easier to gain access to staff, students and also student records. The researcher was conscious that many staff were aware he had been studying and carrying out research for a number of years in the Business School and did not feel threatened. In many cases taking part in the research was perceived as providing a voice for staff. In some cases it seemed the researcher was an outsider when he sought data from the institution due to departmental boundaries. The researcher also felt that he was an outsider when arranging access to classes or to arrange interviews with students who were not on his modules or did not know him. The disadvantages of being an insider researcher are evident in that one's prior knowledge can make one become complacent in the interviews and make assumptions about what the interviewee is telling you or not telling you by their responses. You can hold back from pressing the interviewee for answers, lead the interviewee by your questioning, and the interviewee might respond in the way they think you expect them to. Insider researchers can introduce bias into the research process by the decisions they make on who to interview. The interviewees can also become frustrated because they

feel you already know the answers to your questions. There is the danger one is too close to what is being researched and are thus not being objective. Certainly the results of one's research can be open to question or not trusted by the management because you are an insider, and they would prefer someone who is an outsider to research and report findings to them as they fear you might be emotionally involved in the research and biased in your findings. As an insider researcher you do have insights into the organisation that can enhance your findings and hopefully not blinker them. There is the possibility one's solutions to the research problems are bounded by one's existing knowledge and you do not propose new solutions and just propose existing ones. The insider researcher has to reflect on the research process constantly and question how it is influenced by their proximity to what is being researched.

The case study approach requires a good understanding of the context in which the research is carried out and this could almost become a research project in its own right. To understand the context the researcher needed to explore the products, culture, structure, stakeholders, politics and history within the Business School and its relationship with the other parts of Thistle College. The research is political and there are a number of different stakeholders involved in the process involved in producing this thesis. Key to managing the process was identifying each of the stakeholders and their expectations. It was clear that some stakeholders had more power and interest in the research than others. The researcher had to consider how they managed the differing stakeholder expectations and to ensure these did not influence the research process. Mapping the culture of Thistle College using the cultural web (appendix 5, Johnson and Scholes, 2005, pp. 201-207) was also relevant because it enabled the researcher to understand the culture, attitudes, values and assumptions that underpin the

organisational culture and behaviour in the Business School and how this culture influences how staff relate to students, (Kuh and Love, 2000; Lowe and Gayle, 2007).

It was realised that student integration and retention are sensitive issues and this might influence the information provided by the staff and students who took part in the research. This also had implications for their behaviour. Much of the information collected through the interviews would provide the respondents' ideal view which might differ from the truth. It is only through observation of what staff actually do, that we might get to the reality of what is happening. The collection of information from staff and students was also difficult because it relies on their memory and they might be unable to recall actual events accurately or have a biased recollection of events, e.g. a staff member recalling the reasons why a student withdrew. Similarly, the fact the researcher was carrying out research that might influence policies and strategies within the school may also have an effect on the staff taking part in the research. Certainly the research might also have been seen as a criticism of staff and their role in student integration and retention.

Research ethics

The research focused on the Business School and it was assumed that the researcher's position as a lecturer in the Business School would give access to staff, students and secondary data. The researcher discussed the research with the Head of School and he indicated he would support the research. It was envisaged that sharing the research data and findings with the Head of School would ensure that he would provide support and the researcher was conscious that this raised ethical and political issues, (Bryman, 2001,

pp.509-516). The original research proposal for the thesis was presented to the College ethics committee and was given clearance.

Gathering information from existing students and staff takes time and has an impact on staff's teaching time and students' study time. There was the ethical aspect of interfering with the limited time students have for their studies by engaging them in the research, equally the tight time for delivering classes meant that the research could potentially interfere or provide stress for the tutors' delivery of classes. Accessing students (and a representative sample of students) and staff was seen as problematic due to their timetables but this was overcome by negotiating suitable times with staff and students for interviews. Due to the researcher's position in the institution it was possible students might feel coerced into taking part in the research so it needed to be clear that all information would be confidential and that students were volunteers. Information and consent forms were created and helped to explain the purpose of the research to students and staff. It was explained that the research would help by improving the service provided by the Business School to future students so the incentive to take part was more student centred than just helping out a lecturer do research for their thesis. Equally staff members did not have to give up their time and could feel coerced into taking part because they knew the research and researcher were being supported by their Head of School. Again this point emphasises the political nature of research and how it might impact on everyone involved. It was assumed that staff and students would consent to being recorded during the interviews. Again this required the researcher to remember the ethical aspects of the research process. The researcher was aware of the confidentiality required concerning the content and topics discussed in the interviews. There was also the issue of what to do about anything that came out of the interviews

concerning inappropriate behaviour by staff or students. Students could be critical of their peers or lecturers, equally staff could be critical of their peers. So the researcher was aware that the information gathered from interviews could be sensitive and potentially damaging for the interviewees. Equally the researcher could perhaps be seen as a conduit for staff and students to provide malevolent information. So it was made clear to everyone involved in the research that all data would be confidential and only accessible by the researcher. Certainly this last point could be problematic when we consider that the final thesis will be available for others to read. It is therefore important that no one can be identified in the thesis in case this leads to them being harmed. To avoid the problem of recognition, the names of staff and students have been changed throughout the thesis. The term “the researcher” used throughout this section gives the impression of the writer using a distancing strategy and perhaps implies he is in some way able to step outside of the research but it is clear that he has an influence on the research being carried out because he works in the Business School. It is obvious that the researcher needs to consider the research outputs and how these will impact on the relationships he has with their colleagues in the Business School.

One last area of concern was access to students who have withdrawn from their course as this is also an ethical issue and getting permission from the institution to access and use student data was important. However the permission did not come from the students and because of this there was no guarantee that ex-students would wish to take part in the research and even then might be upset at their data being available. So the researcher was aware of the balance of power during the research and how this shifted between the institution and the researcher, also how the balance of power shifted between the researcher and the students or staff interviewed.

Analysis

The analysis involves both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The analysis is initially quantitative and uses statistical methods to analyse student records. Simple statistical analysis indicates trends associated with the school or courses within the business school. The researcher used Microsoft Excel © and Minitab © for analysing student data. The student questionnaires were coded so that they could be statistically analysed for correlation between integration and retention factors and students' background, college services, etc. NVivo © a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was used to analyse the transcribed interviews. NVivo enabled the researcher to organise the interview data. This provided some of the codes and categories but it was not a substitute for carrying out analysis. The initial analysis of the pilot interviews did not use NVivo as there was not enough material to merit using the software.

Student and staff interviews were taped and transcribed and the field notes written up. During the transcription process the information initially underwent preliminary analysis to highlight any key points or issues. The researcher adopted grounded theory as the framework for the analysis of the interview transcripts. Grounded theory was originally proposed as an approach to qualitative analysis by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Strauss (1987, p.5) indicates that:

The methodological thrust of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis is toward the development of theory, without any particular commitment

to specific kinds of data, lines of research, or theoretical interests. So it is not really a specific method or technique. Rather it is a style of doing qualitative analysis that includes a number of distinct features, such as theoretical sampling, and certain methodological guidelines, such as making constant comparisons and the use of a coding paradigm, to ensure conceptual development and density.

Punch (2003, p 163) states that grounded theory is best defined as:

... a research strategy whose purpose is to generate theory from data. 'Grounded' means that the theory will be generated on the basis of the data; the theory will be grounded in data. 'Theory' means that the objective of collecting and analysing the research data is to generate theory. The essential idea in grounded theory is that theory will be developed inductively from data.

Hayes (2000) indicates the process of developing theory is not straightforward but is more an iterative process in that the researcher will develop theoretical insights which are tested to see how they make sense of other parts of data leading to more theoretical insights. The iterative process described by Hayes complements the case study approach and it suggests that adopting grounded theory is an appropriate approach to analysing the data. Another aspect of grounded theory is the process of theoretical saturation.

Bryman (2001) indicates that this process has a number of distinct phases. In one phase in the coding of data you reach a point where there is no further point in reviewing your data to see how they fit with your concepts and in the second phase you reach a point where new data will not shed any more light on the concept and is referred to as the saturation point.

There are some criticisms of grounded theory. Bulmer (1979) indicates that it is difficult for researchers to suspend their awareness and knowledge of existing theories until a late stage in the analysis process. Bryman (2001) indicates that it is not feasible to conduct research that is theory neutral. The problem is that Glaser and Strauss (1967) do not want the researcher to see their data encumbered with the baggage of existing theory or ideas, known as 'received theory'. However Charmaz (2006) indicates Glaser's position on prior knowledge is ambiguous as he implies grounded theorists should remain uncontaminated by extant ideas but then states 'the sociologist should also be sufficiently *theoretically sensitive* so they can conceptualise and formulate theory', Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.47). It is accepted that any research we carry out takes place within our own social constructs; we are conditioned by what we know. This could be good in that the researcher will have a concept framework in which to focus their research, but on the other hand it introduces constraints. So we could argue that grounded theory offers the opportunity to move outside the constraints built in by our existing knowledge and experience. Another criticism comes from Coffey and Atkinson (1996) who state that because grounded theory requires the process of fragmenting data by coding there is a loss of context and narrative flow.

Bryman (2001) indicates that there can be confusion on how to carry out data analysis using grounded theory and this is due to the competing accounts of what it is and the ingredients that make it up. This view seems relevant when we consider the split between the original writers Glaser and Strauss (1967) and their subsequent developments of grounded theory. Glaser's (1992) objections to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) version of grounded theory relates to their procedures which in his view forced data and analysis into preconceived categories thus going against the original ideas that

underpinned grounded theory. Bryman (2001) states that grounded theory is vague on certain points, for example the difference between concepts and categories and the inconsistent ways in which the terms are used. Charmaz (2000, p.521) suggests that most grounded theory is objectivist in that it aims to uncover a reality that is external to the actors. Charmaz states that perhaps a constructivist approach might be better because categories, concepts and level of theoretical analysis come from the researcher and the way they interact with the area under research and the questions they used to create the data. Certainly Charmaz makes a valid point; the researcher will influence the process and the data and in case study research this will happen because the researcher is normally linked to the case. Glaser (2001) disagrees with many of the points of criticism of grounded theory. Glaser states Charmaz (2000) fails to appreciate that the grounded theory approach follows careful procedures; it is a conceptual method not a descriptive one and should not be criticised for what it is not and does not purport to be. Glaser indicates any bias should be minimised by the researcher due to the comparative process that is part of grounded theory. An interesting point stated by Glaser is that all data is relevant, the statement below is very valid when we consider this research involves a case study:

All is data' is a well known Glaser dictum. What does it mean? It means exactly what is going on in the research scene is the data, whatever the source, whether interview, observations, documents, in whatever combination. It is not only what is being told, how it is being told and the conditions of its being told, but also all the data surrounding what is being told. It means what is going on must be figured out exactly what it is to be used for, that is conceptualisation, not for accurate description. Data is always as good as far as it goes, and there is always

more data to keep correcting the categories with more relevant properties. (Glaser 2001, p.145)

So the analytic procedures of grounded theory enable the researcher to build theory and may reduce the bias and assumptions the researcher brings to the research process. So despite the misgivings of some writers it is evident that the grounded theory approach to analysing the interviews is appropriate for this research. The constructivist approach to grounded theory outlined by Charmaz (2000, 2006) offers the researcher the ability to study how and why the participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations. The constructivist approach is a valid approach when we consider the sensitive nature of the research in this thesis. The constructivist approach acknowledges that the resulting theory is interpretive and that it depends on the researcher's view. Glaser (1992) states grounded theory research is the study of abstract problems and their processes. Glaser (1992, p.25) also specifies that 'the research question in a grounded theory study is not a statement that identifies the phenomenon to be studied. The problem emerges and questions regarding the problem emerge by which to guide theoretical sampling. Out of open coding, collection by theoretical sampling, and analysing by constant comparison emerge a focus for research'. The research in this thesis is emergent, the research questions are there as a guide but the researcher is aware he needs to have an open mind to collecting and analysing the data so that no preconceptions influence the research process and resulting theory. The approach to analysing the data will involve line-by-line coding, comparison of data to find similarities and differences, and focused coding, (appendix 6 provides an example of a transcribed interview). It is clear that it is not a linear process and the researcher will go back and forward revisiting earlier data as the research progresses. Memo-writing,

diagramming and research journal reflection (see appendices 7a, b, c) will also aid the development of ideas and make comparisons between codes and data, data and data, and will enable engagement with the materials so that subsequent data gathering will have more focus. Charmaz (2006) indicates that memos can be used for raising focused codes to conceptual categories. Theoretical sampling will be used on emerging categories until they are 'saturated'. Through this approach to collecting and analysing data the researcher will produce grounded theory.

Chapter 5

Data analysis

Introduction

Chapter five analyses thirty five interviews held with full-time Business School students who have remained on their respective courses and sixteen full-time Business School students who have withdrawn from their courses. The student questionnaires and the staff interviews are also analysed in this chapter. A number of themes emerged from analysing the student and staff interview transcripts, in particular the themes of expectations, relationships, motivation, support, coping and challenges. The writing style in this chapter implies that the themes discussed emerged from the data analysis and there is no intention to force data into preconceived themes or areas. The reader should bear this in mind as they read through the discussion and see the references made to the themes generated by the analysis.

Student interviews

Expectations

Many first year students had no idea what Thistle College would be like; they just knew it would be different. As would be expected many of the interviewees made comparisons with school because it is where they had come from most recently. Students did not know much about the College apart from its location. Students were not aware of the College size, facilities or the processes – it was a complete unknown:

I knew it would be different from school, did not know what to expect, thought the facilities would be better. I wanted to learn when I came here.

(Carole, year 3)

The building was huge, never been to Thistle before, never researched it. I've never been in HE before. It seemed intimidating but the staff were approachable, didn't expect it but hoped it would happen. Thought if no one talks to me I will be completely lost.

(Iain, year 3)

Like school, I thought it would really be like that, I was actually surprised there was no bell at nine o'clock. Sounds really stupid but now that I think about it, I did expect a bell at nine o'clock and bells every hour what ever for lectures but thought it would be more like school, that was just what was putting me off coming.

(Rob, year 2)

No idea what to expect, never been before. I left school at 16, I really didn't have an idea, haven't been studying since school. The institution name misled me, thought it would more about science and engineering not business.

(Lynn, year 3)

Some students based their expectations on film or television stereotypes of students and assumed the college would fit within that construct.

Expected it to be like on TV, big lecture halls, everyone staring down at the one lecturer. I was quite surprised it was like school, small class rooms and interactive. There was a better lecturer to student ratio so more chance to get help if you needed it.

(Ross, year 2)

I don't know really, just like all these movie stereotypes of a college like people basically getting drunk, having fun, going to lectures a lot and a kinda fast paced sort of thing.

(Tom, year 1)

Some students had been to a FE college and they expressed the difference between Thistle College and FE as levels, meaning that Thistle provides degree qualifications and is thus at a higher level than FE. In some cases they were concerned about integrating with the existing students:

...see since I came from outside, one, two, five of us came from outside and thought we would not get on with anybody, but we mixed in with everybody so it has been quite good.

(Liz, year 3)

Jamie: Didn't know anything about it, didn't know what to expect. We took a tour of Shamrock College before, but I knew that wasn't like the same level as this one, so didn't know what else.

Int: So you knew this was not the same level, you knew there was a difference in levels?

Jamie: Aye I knew this was like a much better college than Shamrock College and so I didn't know what to really expect as I had not seen a college like this before.

(Jamie, year 1)

The College prospectus, open days and pre-entry interviews altered some of the students' expectations. Students used the information to compare the College

experience with the school one but the comparison was limited because there was still much they did not know.

Harry: I knew it would be a completely different atmosphere from when at school. Cause at school its all rules, you must do this and that. It is more laid back which is good.

Int: Right

Harry: Obviously you need to meet deadlines and that, but it is still more laid back and

Int: So you knew it would basically be different but you couldn't work out in what way it would be different?

Harry: I didn't know, it was just I'll find out when I get there kinda thing.

(Harry, year 2)

Int: What did you expect the college to be like?

Margaret: I thought it would be the same as school, similar to school classrooms.

(Margaret, year 3 leaver)

Expectations were also set by the student's friends at school. So part of the search and decision making process is to ask the views of others outside of the family.

You hear people talking about it. I already asked people before I came here what Thistle College is like. It's a good college really good, like I had been to Shamrock College and that and it wisnae that good at all.

(Jamie, year 1)

My mate's big sister recommended it, a lot of her pals went here, they all went here, had a good time and all passed.

(Ross, year 2)

Expectations are also set by parents and they can have a strong influence on students especially if they have experience of HE and this has links with the cultural capital concept articulated by Bourdieu (1973) where we can see how these students would benefit from their parents' knowledge and experience.

... I heard it was one of the better ones and it has a better name than the ones say in the town like the Met and stuff like that. My mum says it is better. Plus you could do your degree here as well.

(Tom, year 1)

My mother has a degree and I'll be the next. No one else is studying in the family.

(Iain, year 3)

I just wanted to do something different and my mum did this course and well something similar to this course and kinda recommended it and stuff.

(Amy, year 2)

In some cases the students know what to expect because the course they are studying is a second choice because they did not get their first choice and they have modified their expectations. In many cases this modification has an element of reality to it in that they see the course as a last chance because they have previously been in HE.

...I was late in applying for university so didn't get in ...my mum and dad talked me into going back and I really didn't want to go back to be honest. And mum and dad like kinda persuaded me to go back.

(Jamie, year 1)

...it was the only one that I could get into after I finished High School because I failed my exams and whatever, so it was really like between this and events management but I'd already put down for this one like a back up kinda thing.

(Linda, year 2)

Caly sickened me off, I was on my own all the time, this (Thistle) was closer to home.

(Paul, year 3, leaver)

The original expectations are also confirmed or modified during the induction week and subsequent contacts with academic staff. It is only in the first few weeks the students realise their expectations are being met or not. It is at that point they may decide to leave.

Got talking to people during induction, that's when I felt better. Would have preferred a test run if I had to do it again to find out where it was, what it was like. It was intimidating but staff were approachable. Pleased staff obviously appreciated how difficult it was for us on our first day. They were friendly and have remained that way.

(Iain, year 3)

I was bored with it, it wasn't what I expected I thought there would be more computing.

(Daniel, year 1, leaver)

I did not like the course I really wanted to change ...

(Morgan, year 1, leaver)

The challenge for Thistle College is to manage pre-entry expectations by providing students with realistic expectations so they can make an easier transition into HE. The transition from school or college is difficult because the students don't have the experience. In a sense students' expectations are changing constantly as they progress through their College course and the challenges faced by students relate to managing their time and workloads. Direct entry students coming into year two or year three also faced the same challenges as those entering first year.

Sometimes when you are quite stressed out, especially last year, second semester. You are thinking but I've got to do this course, you find it hard to do it all, your family life, the College, you have to keep yourself motivated as well – this is what I'm gonna get in the end.

(Susan, year 3)

So much information, we didn't understand or looked at before, so hard. Getting used to coursework as well, in the HNC you got it handed back if it was wrong, here you just hand it in. Once you've done the first one you know what kinda work you have got to do.

(Liz, year 3)

Students mature as they progress through College and realise the situation around them changes and they learn what is expected of them:

...people leave, people grow up, people move on, that attitudes change.

(Susan, year 3)

In second year students expect the work to be harder, more demanding and moving toward them having more autonomy over how they learn. In year three they expect to do more work on their own and have less class contact with lecturers. The expectations change and there is acceptance of how things will happen even if they are not happy with the reality of the situation.

...you don't like doing more on your own, you know it is coming in third year, its better to be spoon fed but you don't get the same sense of achievement. Being spoon fed helps you get into it, I missed the easing in to study by skipping first year.

(Lynn, year 3)

I think some of it can be quite tedious, but I think its just because you have to do it, I think there is no other way getting round it, you need to do certain courses and certain modules and I don't think there is any way getting round it.

(Amy, year 2)

Second year second semester was when reality kicked in, when I was going through what am I doing, I must be off my head coming here...

(Lynn, year 3)

I knew two months into second year the course wasn't for me, I got the CertHE.
But I won't come back.

(Sue, year 2, leaver)

Part of the shift in expectations experienced by students is the anticipation that the next year will be more interesting or rewarding. The promise of new modules or opportunities for personal development acted as a motivator for many of the students to continue with their studies:

... couldn't leave now I enjoyed the course and learning something new so I came back to see what else I could learn the following year. Realised year two would be harder, enjoyed the HRM and retail. Year three I could go abroad, so there was always something there for me in the following year to make me stay on.

(Iain, year 3)

...after semester one I didn't know, I was bit confused about if I wanted to keep doing the course but the thing that changed my mind was knowing you can maybe go on work placement and things next year, that is what kept me going.

(Amy, year 2)

Students' expectations are shaped by their experiences as they progress through each semester dealing with the challenges and barriers to progression. Part of the students' mechanism to overcome challenges is the ability to rationalise their position and also know where to find support.

Challenges

Dealing with challenges was a theme that emerged from the interview transcripts.

Students face a number of institutional barriers to completing their studies. The College has its own objectives and these can cause conflict for students because they don't match theirs. The need to manage resources means that institutions will consider its needs before those of the students. The timetable is developed around the staff delivering the classes. Students miss out on options because there are not enough students to make the class worthwhile in terms of tutor time, or there is no tutor so the class is not offered. Sometimes different elective classes are merged and students are forced to switch electives because there are not enough of them to make the class viable. The tutors interact with the official institution's policies and use these as mechanisms for controlling classes and students, the tutors also adopt unofficial policies and these can be decisions made on the spur of the moment which can lead to students feeling out of control:

We were told in like the beginning of the semester. But you must do everything on the timetable but when the second semester comes you get to pick options you do want. So we had to stick with the options in first semester that was given us. But when second semester came they told us no you've already picked your options you had them in first semester, but that was the ones we were told we had to do.

(Ann, year 2)

The timetables produced for students can demotivate them if they have to travel in for only a few hours teaching per day. The student weighs up the effort against the reward for coming in especially if the class is seen as a boring one. Timetables provide structure and students plan their lives around the timetable. In particular childcare and part-time work is managed around the timetable. The institution can cause problems by

adding new classes at short notice to the timetable. Students don't like these sudden changes and resist imposed changes, they prefer timetables to be set in stone. Staff that miss classes or finish classes early are seen as annoying because students are not in College very long and want the time they are there to count. There is also a cost implication both in time and money for students because when they are not in class they could be earning money or to come to college requires them to pay for transport or child care. Students expect classes to be interesting and relevant. Staff delivering classes that are seen as boring all provide points of reinforcement that the class is not worthwhile and this impacts on attendance:

...timetables are unsociable. We are in five days a week, three days for two hours, it is so hard to fit around part-time work. I do need to work, it is the only way I can afford to come to college is to work. One class is 12 – 2 right in the middle of a day, I haven't been to that class, skipped it quite a few times since start of the second semester.

(Ross, year 2)

...it was working out like I was only in for a couple of hours a day (referring to year one) then and it felt like what is the point of coming in at all for one class and that is what I had to get over basically, because I knew I had to be here.

(Amy, year 2)

Actually getting myself out of bed and getting to morning classes when I only have morning classes and nothing for the rest of the day...

(Tim, year 1)

Sean: It is called a full time course but it is not as many hours as I thought it was going to be.

Int: Was that a surprise for you then, to not be in here more hours then?

Sean: Uh-Huh, because I thought I would be in full days at a time.

Int: Would it be better to be timetabled for full days?

Sean: I would rather that than odd hours here and there.

(Sean, year 2)

I was working 16 hours during the week and on Saturday and Sunday. I did find it stressful travelling into the campus. I did not realise how much travelling time would be involved and that took its toll on me, I needed time out

(Paul, year 3, leaver)

Entering HE was a new experience for many students who found it difficult to cope with the new teaching methods and many preferred an interactive approach:

... I do find it hard sometimes to come in all the time to listen to lectures ...I just like to have more discussion and things like that instead of information being rolled out on PowerPoint ...

(Amy, year 2)

...prefer it on the board, don't like overheads, PowerPoint they go too fast... they give us handouts but they don't relate to the same PowerPoint that's up on the board.

(Liz, year 3)

... I prefer being in a lab rather than being just in a classroom, cause then you might get examples to do...just anything like that rather than just sitting there reading the projector and just being lectured at.

(Rob, year 2)

...also people teach differently, students want to be told and how to do it. A lot of people from high school found it a culture shock.

(Iain, year 3)

...there was one of the lecturers who was very very monotonous when he speaks and it just puts you to sleep...because it could be made a bit more like easier to endure, but some of it is just, I don't know quite boring.

(Harry, year 2)

Mature students also had problems coping with the academic work, in many cases there was self-doubt, they felt they shouldn't be in College and perhaps they did not have the ability to cope with their course:

...I was worried sick, don't know if that was being a mature student, can I really study, can I really do this, when I am this old.

(Lynn, year 3)

... I had no idea I had the brains to do it. Is what I'm doing good enough this year (referring back to year one) to get a pass?

(Susan, year 3)

I was too stressed to sit exams as being a mature student I felt under pressure to complete them on time. This put me off returning to complete the course although I was still having health problems too.

(Margaret, year 3, leaver)

Poor time management was recognised by all students as an issue that caused stress and students indicated that they had major difficulties balancing their time across their course, part-time work and family commitments:

I was working twenty hours over four shifts a week and weekend, leaving one day a week to get it done. I have a two year old and family in the evening... if you are not working or have family it is not that difficult. You have all that time at home.

(Susan, year 3)

I wouldn't have the same challenges if I stayed at home with my parents. I wouldn't be doing washing, cleaning floors, the home stuff, living trying to work part-time to earn money to pay bills. Three days a week, 36 hours Monday to Friday then in two days at Uni. Almost impossible, get in from work, making dinner, sitting down absolutely knackered thinking I need to do some work now, I need to do some homework.

(Lynn, year 3)

Almost every student interviewed had a commitment to part-time work and the amount of time spent in part-time work was significant. Part-time work plays a major role in the student experience. Part-time work is planned around students' timetabled classes. As can be seen from the interview statements part-time work hours can be high and impinge on studies especially when the student finishes work late in the evening and has

to come to the College for 09.00 classes. Students are tired due to the number of part-time hours worked. Younger students feel obliged to accept more part-time work, they are afraid to turn it down in case they lose the part-time job. The part-time work is important as it reduces the need to get in debt or borrow money. Young students recognise debt is a factor in their studies and are happy to live with it. Mature students have more responsibilities and are concerned about debt. Students indicated that they needed money to support themselves through College. The money provides them with necessities and many are paying up cars:

Mobile phone, money to go out at the weekend, clothes are necessities.

(Kirsty, year 3)

...new clothes would be classed as necessities. A car is a probably seen as a necessity and a mobile phone could be a luxury, however most people including myself class this as a necessity.

(Jane, year 4)

... the necessity is to have a normal life, have a roof over my head, food clothes that are ok, mobile phone as I like to communicate with my kids ...

(Michelle, year 3)

The amount of time spent working leaves little time available to study:

I have sixteen hours in class, one hour a week studying, quite shameful but that is normal. I increase nearer exam time to four or five hours per week depends on how much I think I need to study.

(Ross, year 2)

The amount of time spent working part-time has a knock on effect on the time spent using the College facilities because many students only came in for their class then went home:

...the library I'll admit I'm rarely in, I've been in a few times.

(Rob, year 3)

This is quite an admission coming from a year three student and indicator of their attitude to studying degree level work. The use of IT labs is also limited:

... well I don't go to the IT labs, it is only the ones that we use when we are in classes that we use. Mostly because if we are not here then I think a lot of people prefer to work at home.

(Amy, year 2)

So the social aspects of College were missing for many students because they do not engage in clubs or student union activities, the exception being breaks between classes when they used the canteen or student union. Many students chose the College because it was local and this meant that they could commute from home. Being local also meant that the College was handy for child care and their part-time work. By being local for the students it would be expected that the College environment would be different from that of a traditional university where students moved away from home. Therefore they would not get the same degree of socialisation on the campus:

Int: Why did you choose this college for your studies?

Margaret: Simply because I took my previous course there and was familiar with the college and lived within close proximity.

(Margaret, year 3, leaver)

So students experienced a number of challenges relating to the time spent in College and the demands on them from part-time work because they needed to earn money to be able to be in College. Students also experienced self-doubt and this was more acute with mature students. Mature students had the additional challenge of managing their home life which caused them guilt for the time they spent on their studies away from their family commitments. All of these challenges had an impact on their academic studies and the time they allocated to studying.

Thinking about leaving

Another challenge was dealing with crisis points. Almost every student who was interviewed has considered leaving. Many of the reasons given by students thinking about leaving their course relate to the challenges discussed earlier. Finance played a part especially if the student had given up a good job to come to College because it took time to adjust to not having money:

I gave up £30,000 and a car, I thought what am I doing I must be off my head.

(Lynn, year 3)

I got offered a full time job with my current employers (job as a Manager in Matalan) that was hard to pass up, so I left.

(Kenny, year 2, leaver)

However many students had part-time work and from the interviews they did not rely on or want to be a burden on their parents for financial help and so finance was not seen as a major reason for leaving.

Students appeared to have a crisis point in first year when they had their first assessment. This was usually at about 6 weeks into the course or toward the exams at the end of the first semester. Second year also had a number of crisis points and these related to the work getting harder and for some students more pressure because they had resit modules from first year to do. In some cases the realisation that they are on the wrong course can be a demotivator especially when it comes halfway through the course and the students face the dilemma should they stay or should they go? The revelation can be crushing for students that they need to change direction and the time and effort they have put in up to that point might be wasted. In some cases it was the realisation that the course was not the right one or not what they thought it was:

... I think it was in the summer and then when I came into second year because I wasn't enjoying it and I didn't think of what it was. But I've changed my mind about what I want to do. I don't want to do anything relating to my course any more. Job wise I want to use this degree to get into primary school teaching.

(Rob, year 2)

Sometimes the course gets too much for students and the juggling of College work, part-time work and family makes them reconsider their position:

Sometimes, when you are quite stressed out, especially last year in the second semester. You are thinking but I've got to do this course you find it hard to do it all, your family life, the College, you have to keep yourself motivated as well – this is what I'm gonna get in the end.

(Susan, year 3)

I was working 20 hours a week, I got 22% for my first coursework and it was just a hassle, I didn't get on with the lecturer so I stopped going. The whole class found it difficult not just me.

(Kelly, year 1, leaver)

A crisis point for third year students was the realisation that third year was ending and they now had to make a decision about what they should do next, it was easier in second year because the decision was to get into third year.

I am finishing this year (BA Business Studies) and I don't know what I will do. I don't think any one in my class knows. I have spoken to some of my friends who are working and have good jobs, high up ones in HR and Retail but I can't think of anything I want to do.

(Becky, year 3)

Other students found that the teaching approach gave them too much autonomy and found it hard to cope without the contact they had experienced before with lecturing staff. This would also be compounded by the reduced timetable hours so that students would not see the need to come in. In some instances their lack of discipline or ability to manage their time well leads them to feel like they were drifting:

... I started to fall away from it a bit during last semester and trying to overcome that was a challenge for me anyway because it was easier to drop out of something than carry on and obviously get what you want from it. I think it is easier to step away from the problem than deal with it in the first place.

(Amy, year 2)

...it was a lot more having to do work on your own and I think because that meant we could, it was up to ourselves when we come in. I think I was just losing interest a bit because I was hardly here. I felt I was hardly here.

(Amy, year 2)

I took like days and weeks off at a time and constantly being late and having to catch up.

(Jim, year 2)

The course was ok, I don't think it was anything they (course leader) or could have done. I just gradually lost interest.

(Ryan, year 1, leaver)

Coping with challenges

A theme that emerged from the interview transcripts was coping with challenges and problems. Students decide to stay on course for a number of reasons. The main approach to staying comes from students themselves and their ability to reflect on the time and effort put into getting where they are at present. They rationalise the decision and consider the amount of time left till they finished, even if they don't like the course:

So I thought I've done a year of it, I might as well stick the rest of it out rather than start all over again ...

(Rob, year 2)

...I've just thought well I'm more than halfway through it now ... I wouldn't leave it unfinished.

(Harry, year 2)

...I need to do them (coursework), so I need to go to class otherwise I fail and it has been a total waste of time.

(Sean, year 2)

It is not an option, what is the point of wasting three years when your gonna drop out?

(Lewis, year 3)

Mature students often go through a cycle of self-doubt and then the revelation they can do it and as a result go through a continuous cycle of self-doubt as they progress through each year of the course:

... it is like stages, no idea I had the brains to do it, passed the first year, might as well do the second year. Then there was no way I'd do a degree cause it would take too long. Then you open more doors if you do more. And I think if I've come that far I can take it further and you just keep going.

(Susan, year 3)

Some students were very motivated even though they had a moment of doubt they still wanted to complete the course:

... I want to get it finished and out of the way... just that I started it, I am a finisher, even if I wasn't enjoying it I still would finish it ...the degree is a good thing for me and the family, mum's got a degree and it might rub off on them, they might go to university.

(Carole, year 3)

Finishing was a common characteristic with motivated students, many saw the course as something that had to be completed:

... set out to do the course. See it through to the end. Can't see why you can dedicate a large proportion of time and effort and throw it all away because you don't like whatever. If I'm gonna do something I'll do it right and see it through till I'm finished.

(Iain, year 3)

The time and effort put in by students is seen as a sunk cost or opportunity cost and as such they are recognising that they don't want to have wasted that effort or the sacrifices made to get to where they are in their studies.

The motivated students had firm life goals and made comparisons with their own family and wanted to do better:

... doing something with my life, everybody goes through hard times, everyone goes through them, it is up to your personality where you go. It is important to do something. I come from a divorced family, always wanted to do the best I can with my life and not turn out like my father, quite simply I don't want to look back on my life in forty, fifty years and think God wished I'd done that.

(Ross, year 2)

Other students had identified a career goal and this had been set back in high school, this motivated them to stick with the course:

I know this is my third year, I know I only have a couple of months to go then I will be able to get a job, I can see the future ... pleased to do something with my life. When I left school I thought I was never going to be able to do anything with my life. My brothers and sisters haven't done anything.

(Liz, year 3)

Other students did not comment on finishing but looked on how to deal with the situation at that time and thus referred to dealing with the leaving crisis as 'getting down to it' or 'get on with it' or 'get the head down' implying the way forward was to put in more time and effort:

...perseverance, thinking right it is only for the next year, may as well buckle down and get on with it, make the best of it your only gonna be here once.

(Ross, year 2)

It is clear from the discussion that students are motivated by their personal goals. Students start out wanting to pass, get a qualification, get a good job and have a career. These are the main reasons students give for doing a College course. The goals can be short term in that they only cover a few months. Some of the students interviewed had long term goals and these had been established back in school. The students with clear goals used them to motivate themselves to overcome setbacks. The highly motivated students did not lose sight of their goals. Motivated students are strong willed, their self belief spurs them on. They recognise their decisions have put them where they are and they have some control over what happens to their time spent in College.

Internal relationships -the importance of having college friends

Another aspect linked to the coping theme was friendships made in class. Making friends early in College is an important coping mechanism for dealing with College life. Making friends happens during the induction week or in the first few weeks, and the friendships evolve during their time in College:

... meeting my class, because again there only was a few of us, so it was quite good, we stuck, we bonded straight away cause we had to, I think. We were all kinda in the same boat cause we'd never been here, we didn't really know what was gonna happen ... we were all kinda wary of what we were doing, what course we were getting into, so we helped each other out

(Amy, year 3)

Students are thrown together during the induction week and they 'gel', the shared excitement of starting the course and the group tasks provide them with common ground and common experiences. Many students are scared and afraid when they start and the chance to make friends alleviates their fear. The students feel safe with friends and the course is less daunting if you have friends than if you are on your own. Each of the students interviewed indicated the importance of having College friends or pals:

Int: Ok moving on, did you take part in a student induction week?

Ann: Yeah I did in first year, yeah I remember that it was good

Int: Why was it good then?

Ann: It was fun. Ronnie would come in and make us make paper airplanes and we had to fire it at the white board. You had to introduce yourself and everything.

And everybody like you know was excited about the course because we thought this was going to be brilliant it is dead friendly.

Int: Ok so you found the student induction week useful?

Ann: Yeap that's when everybody kinda gelled, made friends and that as well, it was good.

(Ann, year 2)

Int: What about the people in our group just now, did you make friends during the induction week?

Sean: It was at least the first day we came in.

Int: So the people you are with just now, they are the ones you made friends with them then, that first week?

Sean: As soon as we came in because there was only about 8 of us in the class, so we all just stuck together since we started.

(Sean, year 2)

Amy: Well we are all quite a tight group, there are only maybe seven of us or something to start with so we are quite a tight group cause there is not a lot of us

Int: Is that from year one then?

Amy: Uh-Huh, we've always been.

(Amy, year 2)

Having friends is like a safety net that enables you to survive college. Having friends enable students to integrate into their study programme:

... it stops them falling out of the course.

(Jim, year 2)

Jim managed to survive two years on his HND programme through the support of friends he had made. However, when he joined the degree programme late he missed the induction week and the first few weeks so knew no one and felt 'awkward' and alone. So perhaps it is hard to break into established friendship groups if you are a latecomer. The lack of friends and the support network can contribute to the decision to drop out. This was a similar experience for some mature students:

...no friends, quite lonely, lots of young 16, 17 year olds from school. I was different from them, at a different stage of my life. Mixing with people who I had absolutely nothing in common with... in second year I managed to meet different people, bit older I get on with quite well. First year the biggest challenge was not the coursework but was how do I fit into this environment ... you can't relate to them. In year 2 I felt I couldn't do it again, it was quite lonely, but I met Liz, Alan and Linda. We help each other by speaking, interact, you have someone to chat to, talk about how your getting on, when you come in.

(Susan, year 3)

I have a close circle of friends at home, I was in a small group at Thistle but I didn't have friends in class, I wasn't involved in the social side.

(Paul, year 3, leaver)

I was new to the College and starting in my 3rd year I didn't know anyone around me to help me cope with the stressful situation.

(Liz, year 3, leaver)

Mature students coped with the course by forming friendships with other mature students because they had more in common:

... the group formed in year 2, early on can't pinpoint when. It just grew. Yeah all those older girls sat down the front, they can't sit at the back they are too blind to see the board if they sat at the back. Started last year, started to get together to study for exams, just grew. Group of us old girls that stick together in class, four of us always sit together, friendly with a few of the younger girls we've done case study work with. They all call me mammy. Quite a good relationship with the girls, don't know if it would carry on outside, certainly socialise with the older ones now.

(Lynn, year 3)

The groups formed by the students are not exclusive and many students indicated that they would let others into their group, this was the same for groups of young students or mature students. Group size ranged from 4 to 8 and tended to remain the same size throughout their time in College. Students indicated that their group of friends were very supportive and a reason for them staying on their course and keeping on track. The group noticed when members were drifting or absent and followed up by checking on them. In most cases the group were more aware of a student's situation than the course leader. The group members were quite persistent in talking group members into staying on their course:

Int: Do you sort problems within the group?

Ross: Texted Kim everyday to get here, to come in, she was hardly here.

Int: Is she gone?

Ross: No, no she is still here. Tried to talk another out of leaving, but he left to be an electrician, as far as I know he is now in Sainsburys.

(Ross, year 2)

In some cases the group was preferable to resolving problems than using a tutor or the student support services. The students are aware of what the group is doing, how the members behave (study) and have built up trust when it comes to supporting each other:

Lewis: Aye, if you are struggling with coursework we usually phone each other. Even if its two o'clock in the morning, cause we know someone will still be up doing it anyway so. I think there has been a couple have wanted to leave as well cause they're bored with of it, but I dunno.

Int: So you talked them into staying?

Lewis: Basically yeah.

Int: So the point is then you don't need to use the tutor or go to student support services?

Lewis: No, I think people would be more intimidated going to a tutor or a student support services team. That is your friends and you get an honest opinion, you think if I go to student support services they're going to tell me to stay anyway. They wouldn't say no just leave, same as a lecturer so.

Int: So that's quite useful then that group has come all the way through first year, second year. Has anyone left over that period of time?

Lewis: No, none have left.

(Lewis, year 3)

In some instances it is not just one member of the group who is advising other members to stay but the group itself forms a pact to stick with the course. So the group cohesiveness and dynamics are a strong influence on the behaviour and norms:

Int: What about the student group you are in just now does that help you stay?

Rob: Ah well I'm quite friendly with John who was in before me. He is my good friend in here, so I thought I might as well stay as he'll also get on my back if I drop out.

Int: Basically everyone is pushing each other to stay?

Rob: Yeah, we're not letting anybody drop out really.

(Rob, year 2)

The support groups formed by the students help them through their studies and provide the social glue that is not provided by the College. Friends are a reason for coming into College and make College fun even when students are not enjoying their course or classes:

... you are not on your own, I've met some great people while I have been here. Got a study group at least once, normally twice a week. It is much easier. Between us we get through it no bother, much more difficult on your own. Quite supportive, all got different skills, bits of the course we are good at so as a group it comes together really well, helps to plug any gaps. Every exam one girl in particular comes over to the house and we sit for 3 or 4 hours before the exam and talk through the various subjects, how we would approach things. It is not studying, not a cram. Just helps to calm you down a bit, yeah we actually do know a fair bit about this exam, we'll be fine.

(Lynn, year 3)

Internal relationships – the academic staff

The approachability of academic staff takes many students by surprise because they expect the staff to be like their high school teachers and be more formal. Access to staff is important to students because they need to know they can get help. Students do attempt solve problems in their group but when this fails they go to the staff for help. The student interviews indicate that the staff have an open door policy and this makes access very easy for students because there is no need to book a time, students can just drop in:

... I like the lecturers, not as if you can't talk to them if you need help, always go and ask them for stuff ... if you don't want to ask them in front of the class you can always see them when you are not in class.

(Liz, year 2)

... all staff are helpful, open door policy makes it more approachable for everyone. Staff support you the best way they can. If you are direct with them and tell them where your problems lie, always been able to get the support that I needed, where I needed it, when I needed it.

(Iain, year 3)

In some cases the help is provided but staff have strings attached and they will provide help when the students are seen to be putting in the effort:

... didn't think we were equal when I started, saw it with a school girl perception and lecturers like teachers. Now feel like an equal, no one looks down on us. Don't feel that at all. May be down to how much work you put into things. I've heard other people

complaining - saying "I hate the way he talks to me". But I think if you are not putting in the effort or the time or not bothered attending classes then tutors don't have the same time to spend with you or feel that they are wasting the time spent with you. I've never experienced anything like that, I've always felt comfortable.

(Lynn, year 3)

Some staff are more approachable than others and as such students will avoid those that are seen to be unhelpful. The way in which tutors deal with students who seek help can be a barrier to students. Students want a relationship where they are treated as adults and resent being talked down to:

Like last year in Pauline's class I felt like a two year old, I was getting spoke to like I was at nursery. Just silly little things in the class, it was like, I suppose in a way you were getting put down if you didn't know what you were doing, but that's the whole point of being there to learn.

(Sean, year 2)

...there are a couple of lecturers I couldn't approach, not intimidating, I just find some unapproachable. Feel if I went to them with a problem I would be told it is my problem.

(Ross, year 2)

...treated as an equal, compared to school. Never nice if anyone is looking down on you, always feel quite small, it is better for everybody if everyone is seen as an equal. There still should be that respect there for the fact they're doing the job and you are here to learn.

(Ross, year 2)

I didn't get on with the lecturer so I stopped going.

(Kelly, year 1, leaver)

The relationship between staff and students is a factor in students staying on course. The small classes and intimate teaching sessions allow relationships to be built up over time. Students do rely on the pastoral care of the staff and the interest they show in them. The relationship between the students and their tutors develop over the three years and the tutor becomes at times a surrogate parent. The fact that academic staff remember students' names indicates to them that the staff are interested and care about them:

In second year when I was going "through my what am I doing I'm off my head".

Janice (the tutor) who discussed me moving from part-time to full-time approached and asked is everything ok how are you doing? Are you quite enjoying it as I feel responsible because you are here? I just thought that was really nice that she even remembered that far back when she obviously sees a lot of different people and has quite a busy schedule. I know it might sound ridiculous, but that was really encouraging for me at that point, just to know the individual thought was still there.

(Lynn, year 3)

The students' relationship with academic staff is more important when we consider they are the focal point in the delivery and assessment of the modules, also the implementers of the College integration and retention strategies. Staff can be flexible depending on their teaching commitments and can re-arrange when they deliver classes and this can support students, especially when their timetable is a problem, again this is down to the willingness of staff to help:

We all knew the start of semester two would be bad, but didn't expect to be in five days, but some lecturers came and went, so it freed off a day.

(Ross, year 2)

Support provided by integration and retention strategies

The College staff uses a number of integration and retention strategies. These are a mix of formal and informal strategies. The formal strategies refer to an induction week (2 or 3 days), guidance, study skills, student feedback policy, assessment strategies, curriculum development, staff student liaison meetings and social events run by the Business School. Informal strategies are those adopted by members of staff. The informal strategies include mock tests, mock exams, pastoral care provided by individual lecturers, classes moved to meet students needs, extra classes added by the lecturer but not on the lecturer's or the student's timetables, adjustments to teaching and assessment due dates. So we have a mix of strategies and rely on the staff to deliver them and some of these strategies, particularly the informal ones, take up staff time and will only be followed by a few members of staff. Many of the students interviewed needed prompts when it came to discussing integration and retention strategies and in a number of cases they associated retention strategies with bursaries so a financial incentive was seen as something that would keep students on board. The assumption we can make is that students are unaware of the integration and retention strategies, and the activities associated with student integration and retention are just part of the student experience operating in the background:

Int: the college uses a number of different retention strategies to keep students on course. Can you tell me any strategies you are aware of?

Jim: No, I can't really tell of any strategies. Can you write some of these strategies?

Int: Guidance would be one.

Jim: Aye guidance but I never really went, guidance meetings twice a year we had them. Fair enough, we did get offered more guidance meetings but I wasn't interested in them to be honest.

Int: Ok, perhaps study skills?

Jim: Study skills? I didn't really use that as well. Mostly if I went and asked for study help it would probably be one of the class mates.

(Jim, year 2)

Guidance was not consistently offered to students and this gives out the message that it is not important:

... guidance was an opportunity, didn't go. Went once with Sarah, quite happy that was it. Not approached in year 2 for guidance. Would be good if there was someone impartial if you had issues with your courses, would be helpful early on in the term... Study skills there were no separate classes on that, it was part of the class.

(Ross, year 2)

Guidance I had one meeting in semester 1, I haven't had study skills

(Liz, year 3)

Int: So you said you had guidance at least twice?

Ann: Yeah

Int: Was guidance useful?

Ann: Just asking you what you thought. You tell them but you never heard anything getting done about it. So for all I know he just filled out the sheets then you know that is it. We were never made aware of anything, because I know

everybody in the class complained about Law and Tax. But we were just told tough you have to do it in one semester. So I feel as if sometimes the students don't get listened to.

(Ann, year 2)

Not had much guidance, never needed it. Study skills had a bit of that, thought it was a bit late in year 3. We were meant to have something else on how to do essays but it never happened. I have never been involved in any business school social events.

(Susan, year 3)

I am a mature student, it is not a lot of practical help, but it is an opportunity for feedback. I have had 2 guidance interviews in 2 years.

(Lynn, year 2)

The above excerpts from interviews indicate students don't see the need for guidance or only associate it with problems, and certainly if they have problems they do need to see something is being done. The relationship students have with staff is important and students will welcome guidance with staff they like, the link to the guidance tutor is enhanced if the tutor also teaches them.

... I had that with Ruth, she was like our guidance tutor last year and we had her for class, she was dead helpful and we would see her for everything. But now it is Pauline and I don't know, she is not approachable like Ruth was. Like last year in Pauline's class I felt like a two year old, I was getting spoke to like I was at nursery.

(Sean, year 2)

I have had guidance meetings but it was brief because I didn't have any problems at the time.

(Amy, year 2)

I think if there is a problem we know we can go direct to our lecturer, I don't think we have had to take it further, well I certainly haven't.

(Amy, year 2)

Never really seen the benefit of guidance because of the open door policy, guidance is not needed. I have only had 2 meetings since first year – your doing fine, it was short informal, the message was just keep it up.

(Iain, year 2)

Alice just came in and said sign this form and that was it, that was guidance.

(June, year 2)

Int: Have you had guidance?

Louise: Had it once in third year, had it twice in year 2. We had a full days teaching last year and this year, so we didn't have time to fit it in. It was rather rushed.

Int: So what happened?

Louise: Well one day Pat would catch us between classes and just do it when she saw us, we didn't have appointments.

Int: Was the guidance worthwhile?

Louse: Not really because I didn't have any problems, it is only worthwhile if you have got problems.

(Louise, year 3)

My name is not on the board for guidance this year. I had an interview before but it was disorganised, I didn't get anything from it and I feel it is important.

(Sally, year 3)

The approach by some staff to guidance gives out the wrong message to students. If the guidance is seen as a ticking box exercise then students don't value the guidance offered. Certainly more input needs to be put into the guidance interview by staff, time needs to be allocated to guidance and there needs to be preparation involved in delivering guidance. Students see the access to staff and the open door policy as a substitute for guidance and because students associate guidance with problems then they won't show up for guidance if they don't have problems. Many problems are resolved outside the guidance times because students can go to the staff if they have problems.

Study skills were mentioned in a number of interviews and it was clear that these were embedded in some of the modules (in particular Learning and Career Development) and students did not always appreciate what was being taught. The interviews also indicated that study skills inputs from tutors was not always provided in later years although inputs would be welcomed by students. So there is an assumption students know how to study and prepare for assessments/exams.

The College has a policy on assessment feedback and the time it should take. Student interviews indicated that it could take a while before assessment feedback took place and even then they felt more detail was needed than what was provided. Most students welcomed the feedback on their work:

... I think when you are trying to find your way round the course and never having sat exams for a very long time, it is quite useful then.

(Holly, year 3)

Feedback is important, it is not as quick as I would like but I am impatient, it is only a few weeks but it feels like a lifetime when you are hanging on waiting for results.

(Lynn, year 3)

Feedback on assessments, exams and progress in class are an important factor in student integration and retention, especially in the building of relationships between staff and students.

Student induction was covered earlier in this chapter and it was clearly a key stress point for many students and also the point when they started to form relationships with staff and students. The orientation to the College, the shared experience and introduction to their classes all help with integration into the College and what it means to be a student.

Staff in the Business School check attendance and the school tried to use an attendance monitoring scheme referred to as the “traffic light system”. Students who had poor attendance were sent a green, amber or red letter depending on how bad their attendance was. This scheme was trialled on a number of student groups and then stopped.

Louise: in first year we had the warning letters, other than that I’ve not heard of anyone having anything done to them.

Int: Nothing in year 2?

Louise: Died away after first year.

Int: Did you feel it worked?

Louise: No not really, they would come in for their meeting with somebody and promise they would come back then they would not come back.

(Louise, year 3)

The Business School developed new modules for first year, created more interactive assessments and reduced the number of exams to help students to integrate into their courses. The modules shared a number of subjects to reduce the silo approach students had had before of the business subject areas, the plan was to get students to see how the various business subjects linked to each other. Students were also given an early assessment to boost their confidence, and there was also an early assessment based on their knowledge of the Business School. The thinking behind this was to ensure students knew more about their College environment and help them to integrate into College. The strategy seemed good on paper but many students could not see the purpose of a short exam on the College environment:

What we were being taught was unnecessary, it was not what we needed to know. In year one it was not relevant to get an awareness or orientation of college exam. Social events would have been a better idea. The quiz in year one helped to get people involved and to talk to other students.

(Iain, year 3)

Certain subjects in year one were not relevant for me I had done them before in school. I did not see the point of career development in year one, perhaps better for year 3 when you are looking for a job.

(Iain, year 3)

The institution has re-designed courses and course content as a strategy to engage students but it has not been working because students don't see the need for some of the subjects or the way in which they are assessed. There is a need to think carefully how students perceive the tasks, activities and subjects being taught. If the purpose is to engage and integrate students then more social activities with other students and staff would be more beneficial.

Mock exams and tests appear to benefit the conscientious students because only they turn up, the students who would benefit from the mock exam/test know when they are happening and don't show. In some cases staff did not announce the mock tests and just surprised the students when they came into class:

Holly: We had a mock exam a fortnight ago that Sally did with us for management accounting. Last semester we had them in tax and financial management as well, they are quite big on mock exams in accounting.

Int: Do you like them?

Holly: I don't like them.

Int: Good to check out how you are doing?

Holly: Half the class don't turn up. It is the same old story, when Sally said the mock exam was on and it was not optional to miss it. It was the usual suspects that turned up. If they don't feel they can do it they just don't turn up.

Int: Is this the younger members of the class?

Holly: It tends to be. I didn't think I would pass the mock exam but I still turned up for it.

(Holly, year 3)

We have had mock exams before, it is a form of feedback and that was helpful but it was mainly showing me what I was doing wrong.

(Rob, year 2)

In one of our classes last semester as we got closer to the exam we did a couple of mock questions to see how we would do. That was good because it showed how badly I had done and I was able to make sure I knew how to do better next time round.

(Harry, year 2)

Mock exams, it varies between tutors. Some tutors are consistent and plan them, others surprise you. The mock exams are not nice, they get you worked up, but they also give you an indication of where you are and how much work you have to do or don't have to do.

(Lynn, year 3)

So it is clear students do value revision sessions and mock exams although students fear taking part in them and some avoid the chance to learn how well they are prepared for exams.

Support from outside the College

Many of the students interviewed indicated that their parents had not been in HE and that they were the first ones in their family to enter HE. This is an interesting aspect in that these students cannot link into the experience within their family to guide and advise them. Their parents would not understand what it was like to be in HE and the challenges the students faced to keep on their course. Much of the support is moral or physical support and students needed to seek financial support:

Overall my parents, grandparents, aunts are very supportive of what I am doing, plenty of encouragement. Moral support is everything to me, very valuable. Younger student last year said her mum wasn't encouraging, her mum told her "why put your self through the stress just give up". I think if my mum did that I would crack down the middle. My partner nods at the right moments. That is as far as he goes.

(Lynn, year 3)

Mum gets me up, the rest of family support me. My family are happy I have got drive, ask me how I am doing, getting on alright? In high school she offered to get me a tutor if I was stuck. We don't have a lot of money, but she would put that into my future...get moral support, never asked for financial support although I know its there if I need it. I can get by on my own work and bursary. Would rather not be a burden on my family. Well not a burden, they work hard for their money I don't see why I should get it off them. I reckon I would much sooner quit than take money off my parents.

(Ross, year 2)

Int: Do you get much family support?

Ann: My mum and that do. I suppose they do support me in everything I do, its not like they do anything if you know what I mean.

Int: They could give you space to work?

Ann: If I'm in my room studying, my mum will bring in sandwiches and stuff, make my dinner, I suppose that is a bit of support.

(Ann, year 2)

Int: Did you have much family support throughout your studies?

Joe: No, my mum and dad would try and say “aye, your doing a good job” and think that was encouragement, but they didn’t really sit down and help out with the work. Basically I don’t think they would have been able to understand the work anyway to be honest. I never really got much help from them, to be honest, no.

(Joe, year 3)

From the interviews students’ families attitude to education were positive and they wanted them to reach the goal of going to College and succeeding:

Sean: My mum she always goes on about she never had the chance if I say I can’t be bothered going in today it is only for an hour, I won’t go I’ll stay in my bed. And its “you don’t understand, this is an opportunity I never had”. I like say you can still go back now and learn. “I can’t I need to pay for the house blah, blah, blah”, alright ok.

Int: So they’re quite supportive in that they are keen for you to be here?

Sean: Yes

Int: Any other ways in which they support you when you are here?

Sean: Not really

Int: They ask how you are doing?

Sean: If they see me at the computer they assume, he is doing college work, leave him alone.

(Sean, year 2)

More pressure is placed on students whose parents have experience of HE especially if they are in education or studied recently because they have an idea of what the student is experiencing:

My mum has a degree already ...I get support mentally and financially, could not have got this far. Mother challenges me to do better, praises my grades but always says I need to go up a grade.

(Iain, year 3)

My mum has done a similar course to this. Not the exact same, she has done business management so she knows if I'm stuck she can help me with it to an extent... she is studying, she is quite strict with the "you better be studying for exams, you better have this for the deadline". She is good that way because she does push us, I know that other parents would maybe just leave you, and if you don't do it they don't really bother.

(Amy, year 2)

Clearly parents with an experience of HE can offer more practical help to students in that they can help them make the transition into HE easier and progress through their College course. Students entering HE for the first time have a harder task because they lack the experience and are unable to tap into the experience in their immediate family and friends. But this does not mean they will not get support from their parents or partners, just that they lack the HE experience. The interviews also indicate that students experience levels of parental support ranging from very hands-on to no support at all. There is no guarantee that students with parental support will taken advice or the support offered:

My mum is on the BA (Business Admin course) and I wanted to leave, she couldn't talk me round and I left.

(Claire, year 1, leaver)

Questionnaire findings

The questionnaire in appendix 3 was developed to gather data in relation to findings of the interviews and in doing so enhance the memos developed in the preliminary analysis. The questionnaire was administered during semester 2 and sought to gather data on the following areas:

- The student experience in College.
- The College environment.
- Student motivation.
- The challenges faced by students.
- Parental support.
- Family background.
- Educational experience prior to joining the College.
- Integration and retention strategies experienced by the student.
- The amount of time spent in part-time employment.
- The reasons why students attend College.
- Factors that influence the student decision making process.
- Relationships with staff, the institution and other students.

The decision to go to College and prior experience

75 questionnaires were returned from a population of 280 full-time students in the business school during 2007-2008. The student population contained 190 female and 90 male students. The gender split from the returned student questionnaires was 49 female and 26 male. The questionnaires returned included 28 first year students, 28 second year students and 19 third year students. The relatively small number of students who returned questionnaires raises the possibility that the sample is skewed and may not be

truly representative of the population. The questionnaire certainly provided background data and on reflection it is clear that the student interviews were a more valid data collection approach. Table 5.1 below summarises the findings on the source of information that influenced students’ choice of course.

Table 5.1 How did you find out about the course?

	Percentage
Friends	9.3
School Teacher	16
Careers Officer	12
Employer	1.3
College Literature	34.6
Open day	25.3
Personal visit	5.3
Advert	6.6
Other	5.3 Internet, 5.3 UCAS, 4 Family

It is clear that school influences, College literature and open days are the main providers of information for students for their course choice. The expectations students might have of their course and the institution may be set by teachers and school careers officers. The College literature may also set expectations and the Open days offer face-to-face opportunities to back up existing expectations or develop new ones. The question asked for the main information source and in every case students provided multiple answers so that it can be construed that information is provided from multiple sources.

Goal setting and student motivation have been identified by Tinto and other researchers on retention as key elements for student integration. Table 5.2 indicates the reasons why students chose their course. Again the question required students to describe the best reason but in many cases the student cited a number of factors. So the reason for

entering a course is not straightforward, and if there are multiple reasons, then there will be multiple expectations.

Table 5.2 Reasons for choosing current course

	Percentage
Further qualifications	40
Gain a job at the end	58.6
Personal interest	9.3
Keep parents happy	5.3
Follow a career	24
Friends doing the course	1.3
Other	No Jobs 1.3

The main drivers for choosing a course appear to be the need to gain further qualifications, follow a career and gain a job at the end. Interestingly the influence of parents and friends seemed quite low and this might be because students want to be seen to be having a choice in what course they do. It could be also a lack of parental experience of HE. Certainly the three main reasons for choosing a course imply that there are expectations that a course will deliver on these pre-course needs.

Table 5.3 Why did you decide to attend this College?

	Percentage
Institution reputation	18.6
Course reputation	14.6
Recommended by friends	8
Recommended by family	8
Near home	57.3
Wanted to attend with friends	2.6
Little chance of a job	2.6
Careers advice	5.3
Recommended by school	6.6
Easy to get to by public transport	16
Other	None

Table 5.3 explores the student decision further by considering the issue of which institution. Again students provided multiple reasons for choosing the College/University. The table indicates course and institution reputation are important. This has links with Bourdieu (1973) and cultural capital, which indicates that there are

expectations being set of what is to be gained by joining the College. 57.3% of students chose the College because it was near home. This is not surprising when we consider the findings from the interview transcripts that indicate students prefer to be local, they also work part-time locally and many have child care issues. Public transport is also cited as a reason and this figure is low at 16% but in keeping with the fact many of the students have access to, or own, a car.

Figure 5.1 indicates 72% of students were strongly supported in their decision to go to College. Combining the last three bars in the chart indicate that 14.5% had little or not support from their family. Family support provides some input into what motivates students and perhaps what sets the perception students might have of their course/institution. The questionnaire results also indicate that 20% of students were influenced by friends to go to College, interestingly 53.3% of student had friends joining the College at the same time as them so perhaps friends actually do influence the decision to go to College.

Figure 5.1 Decision to go to College supported by Family

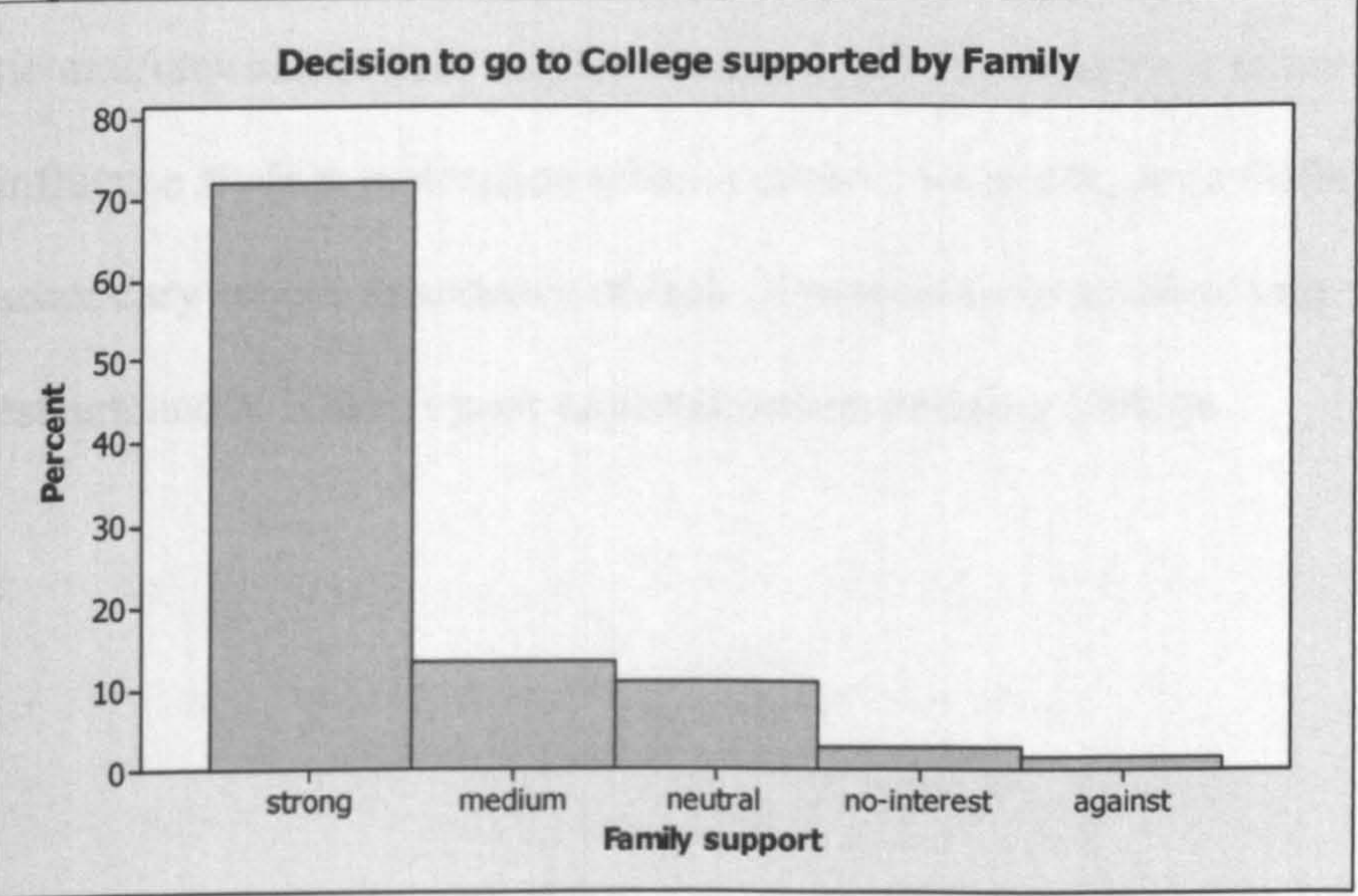
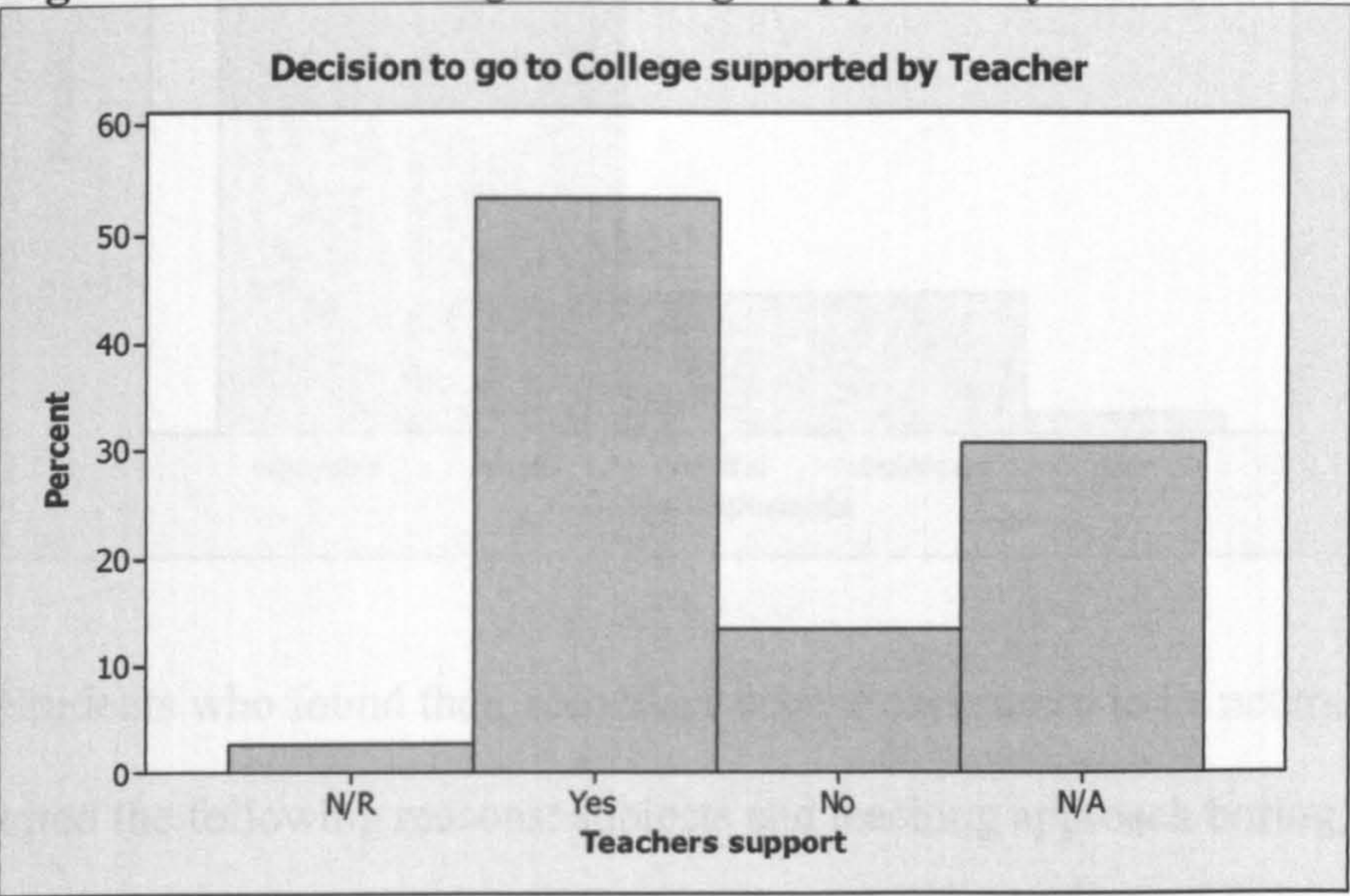


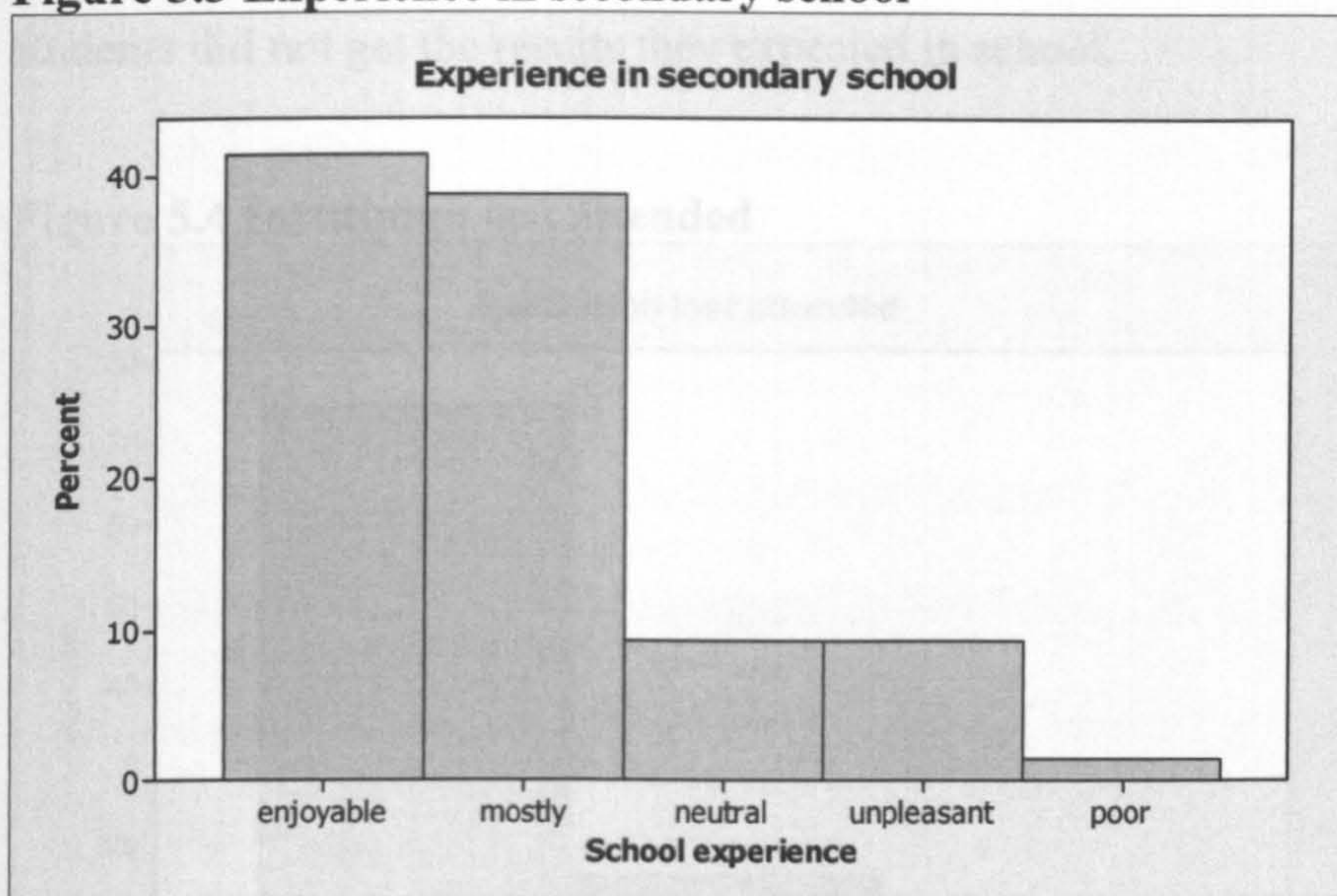
Figure 5.2 provides a link to the table 5.1 in that it shows the influence the teacher has on the decision to go to College. Again we can consider the results in relation to how the teacher motivates the student and also sets out expectations for the student.

Figure 5.2 Decision to go to College supported by teacher



53.3% of students indicated that their decision to go to College was supported by their teacher. 13.3% of students indicated that the decision was not supported by their teacher and this might correlate to the experience students had in secondary school. Figure 5.3 indicates that 79.9% of students had a good experience at school and 19.1% have a neutral/unpleasant/poor experience and again the experience in secondary school may influence student motivation when it comes to applying for a College course. A poor secondary school experience or lack of support from teachers may result in a lack of self esteem and as a result poor expectations on entering College.

Figure 5.3 Experience in secondary school

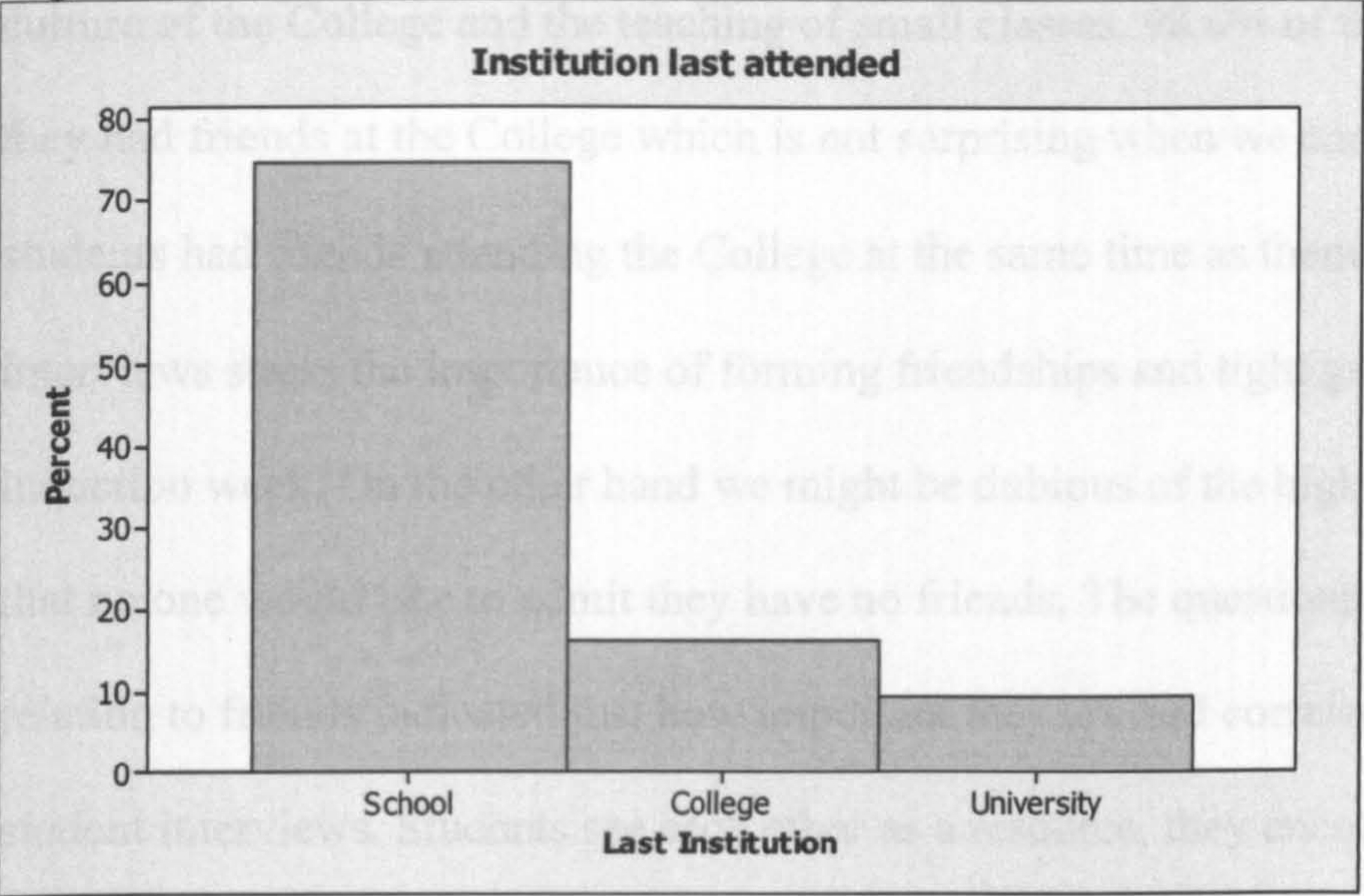


Students who found their secondary school experience to be neutral, unpleasant or poor cited the following reasons: subjects and teaching approach boring, did not get on with people, not mature enough, it was a rough school, bullying, classes you had to take (no choice) and no motivation. The student experience prior to joining College has been identified by Tinto (1975) as a factor influencing student retention and integration.

Figure 5.4 (page 121) shows 74.6% of the students had come from school, 16% from college and 9.3% from university. This then points to different expectations and the influence that prior experience might have in shaping students' expectations and motivation. This would be expected when we consider the findings from the questionnaire on students' experience in previous institutions where 17.3% had left without qualifying, so in this case the College was another chance. The opportunity to have another chance in higher education might be a great motivator. The questionnaire results indicated that 63% of students saw the College as their first choice. 17% of the students wanted to do similar business courses elsewhere, 20% of the students

considered courses related to teaching and veterinary medicine which implies the students did not get the results they expected in school.

Figure 5.4 Institution last attended



Continuing with the expectations theme, students were asked about their impression of the College prior to attending. 49.3% students had a positive impression of the College before joining, and 49.3% had no impression of the College before joining. 1.6% of the students had a neutral impression of the College. Many of the students who had been at university before joining the College had no impression of what it would be like. It could be assumed that the positive impression came from the information sources in table 5.1.

Social integration and relationships

Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999) indicate the need for students to integrate and this suggests that relationship building is an important aspect of retention. Students need to build relationships with the staff, fellow students and the institution. The student interviews indicate the relationship students seek with their tutor and the importance of

friends. The questionnaire results indicate that 89.3% of students have a positive relationship with staff, 2.6% had a negative relationship with staff and 6.6% had no relationship with staff. The close relationships students have with staff have a link to the culture of the College and the teaching of small classes. 98.6% of the students indicated they had friends at the College which is not surprising when we consider 53.3% of students had friends attending the College at the same time as them and the student interviews stress the importance of forming friendships and tight groups during the induction week. On the other hand we might be dubious of the high result if we consider that no one would like to admit they have no friends. The questionnaires' comments in relation to friends indicated just how important they are and correlate quite well with the student interviews. Students see each other as a resource, they encourage each other, provide advice, notes and work in groups. Friends are seen as "mega" important and students say they would not be there without their help. Friends provide reassurance and motivate, they also "help you have a good time in College". 38% of students felt there was no difference between the friends they had in College and those outside of College, perhaps these were secondary school friends who had come to College together. 57% of students indicated there was a difference between friends in College and those outside of College. So perhaps the friendships made in College are bounded and may only last as long as the student is at College. The student interviews indicated that there was a difference between the friends in College and those at home. There is a level of friendship in which the students have College friends, work friends and social friends made at secondary school (or from their local area) who are seen as closer and who they socialise with. So when students talk about friends they do so in general terms and not all friends are the same. The questionnaire indicates that the College friendships are formed during the induction week and in class. This corresponds with the student

interviews which stressed the importance of forming friends and support groups early in the semester.

The questionnaire attempted to capture how students relate to the institution. 69.3% of the students had a positive relationship with the College, 2.6% felt the relationship was negative, 17.3% had no relationship with the College and 10.6% were unsure. 92% felt that the College was a student friendly place and this corresponds with the student interviews which saw staff and the facilities as student friendly. Part of the socialisation process will be the student identifying with the institution and seeing it as a friendly place because they have become integrated into how things happen in the institution, becoming linked to the culture of the organisation. As Tinto (1975) and Astin (1999) indicate it is a journey and students will be become integrated academically and socially the longer they stay on their programme. It is possible to make the connection that student expectations will adjust as they progress through College and this will be part of the integration. The questionnaire explored the time spent in class by students and it is clear that integration might be difficult when students are only in class for short periods of time, see table 5.4.

Table 5.4 Descriptive Statistics: Hours in class.

Variable	Year	N	N*	Mean	SE Mean	StDev	Minimum	Q1	Median
Hours in class	1	28	0	12.679	0.598	3.163	0.000	12.000	13.000
	2	28	0	11.107	0.497	2.629	7.000	10.000	10.000
	3	19	0	8.737	0.841	3.664	4.000	6.000	8.000
N for									
Variable	Year	Q3	Maximum	IQR	Mode	Mode			
Hours in class	1	14.750	20.000	2.750	12, 13	8			
	2	13.250	16.000	3.250	10	15			
	3	10.000	16.000	4.000	6, 10	4			

Table 5.4 indicates that year 1 students on average spend 12.679 hours in class per week, year 2 students 11.107 hours and year 3 students 8.737 hours. What needs to be

explored by the College management is the actual time spent in class and what appears on the timetable. Student interviews indicated that students negotiated with staff to move lectures and tutorials to make their timetables more amenable to their part-time employment, travelling and childcare arrangements. This has obvious links with the relationship between staff and students that allow this mutual agreement on teaching and relies on the willingness and flexibility of the staff. Some of the hours on the year 3 timetable relate to external consultancy and this would mean some hours are notional. Students thus have classes timetabled that are not taught but are more like short infrequent consultations with tutors, and there is an expectation from tutors that the time not in class will be spent on academic work by the student. The student interviews indicate that in reality any time not in class is spent on part-time work. The tutors and the students know this, but it is taken for granted by tutors and students that the work will be done.

Student interviews and questionnaire results indicate dissatisfaction with disjointed timetables and College days with only a few hours of class contact. The issue becomes complicated if the students are in College for short periods. How are these periods organised by tutors and what are the students doing when they are not in class? Certainly the interviews indicate students leave coursework to the last minute and cram for exams, the remainder of the time is spent off campus working rather than studying.

Student motivation

The qualitative material from the questionnaire provided data on what motivates students, what demotivates students, positive experiences, negative experiences, reasons for leaving and reasons for staying. Students were asked what motivates them in

College. Succeeding and gaining a qualification and good jobs were common themes. These are all linked to the output of their efforts. Some students referred more to the process of getting there, they found positive feedback, interesting classes, improving and passing modules with good results very motivating. Other students found the relationships they had with staff and friends as motivating. So succeeding, the learning experience and relationships were the main themes that linked to motivation.

Students indicated they were demotivated by a number of things. Failing exams and coursework and negative feedback all demotivated students. Time between classes and early finishes were annoying for students because “lectures are scheduled for 2 hours and they let you away after 20 minutes”, and last minute cancellations of classes lead to poor motivation. Boring lectures and subjects also led to poor motivation.

The students who indicated that they had considered leaving indicated a number of issues that had an impact on their motivation. Problems with the course being disorganised or the feeling that they were on the wrong course and it was not what they thought it was were all factors that lead to dissatisfaction. Relationship was another theme that emerged, poor relationships with other students or certain lecturers also led to thinking about leaving. Some students had feelings of doubt they felt they were not capable of doing the course. Course content was another theme that linked to thinking about leaving. Students indicated boring subjects as an issue, again this might be linked to relationships with their lecturer. Students also felt they were not being challenged enough and were not learning anything, again this has links with the relationship they have with the lecturer as it can lead to the course not meeting expectations, especially

when they say that they felt the subjects were irrelevant. These are all aspects that were found in the student interviews.

Students who considered leaving but stayed indicated a number of reasons for persisting. The theme of investment or 'sunk costs' came through, students recognised that it would have been a waste of their time having come so far to quit now. Many referred to the "finish being in sight" and it "being not long to go". Some saw the finishing point as a time to take stock, so they were not happy with the situation but wanted to finish then move on. Other students had reflected on their position and thought they had been too "harsh on themselves" and found they were capable after all. Others indicated that they knew they could do better which hints that they had experienced poor results or feedback on their work. Others indicated that they had a goal and that kept them going. Interestingly one student referred to failing a second time would not be good on their curriculum vitae, so a recognition they had no option but to stick it out. The results discussed here mirror the comments in the student interviews especially the references to time, effort, capability and the need to persevere.

Students were asked about the positive things they had experienced in College. A number of themes appeared and it was evident that students found the small class teaching and integrated teaching approaches as very positive aspect of their experience. Meeting new people and making friends was also a positive. Friendly and approachable staff was another positive experience. The importance of relationships with staff and other students were evident from the data and this matches the student interview findings. Relationships with staff linked to terms like friendly, supportive, helpful, approachable, openness, and feedback were typical comments.

Students also indicated the negative things they had experienced in College. Lecturers and the delivery of subjects was one area that led to poor experiences. Students indicated some lecturers “did not want to be teaching them”, “I have learnt nothing from them and who don’t want to be here”, “poor student interaction”, “some lecturers don’t know what they are doing, not organised”. Delayed feedback on assessments was also a negative experience. The amount of coursework was also an issue for students. Class timetables was also a source of poor experience for students, comments indicated gaps between classes, classes being cancelled, classes not running their full time and “hanging around” were all issues for students. The themes emerging from the questionnaire were similar to experiences for the students interviewed.

Figure 5.5 indicates that 22.6% of students have considered leaving. Certainly crisis points are identified in the secondary data as the first 6 weeks of year one and the Christmas period when students sit exams. Student interviews have also identified the second semester in year 2 and the first semester in year 3 as crisis points for students when they hit a low and consider leaving.

Figure 5.5 Have you considered leaving this institution?

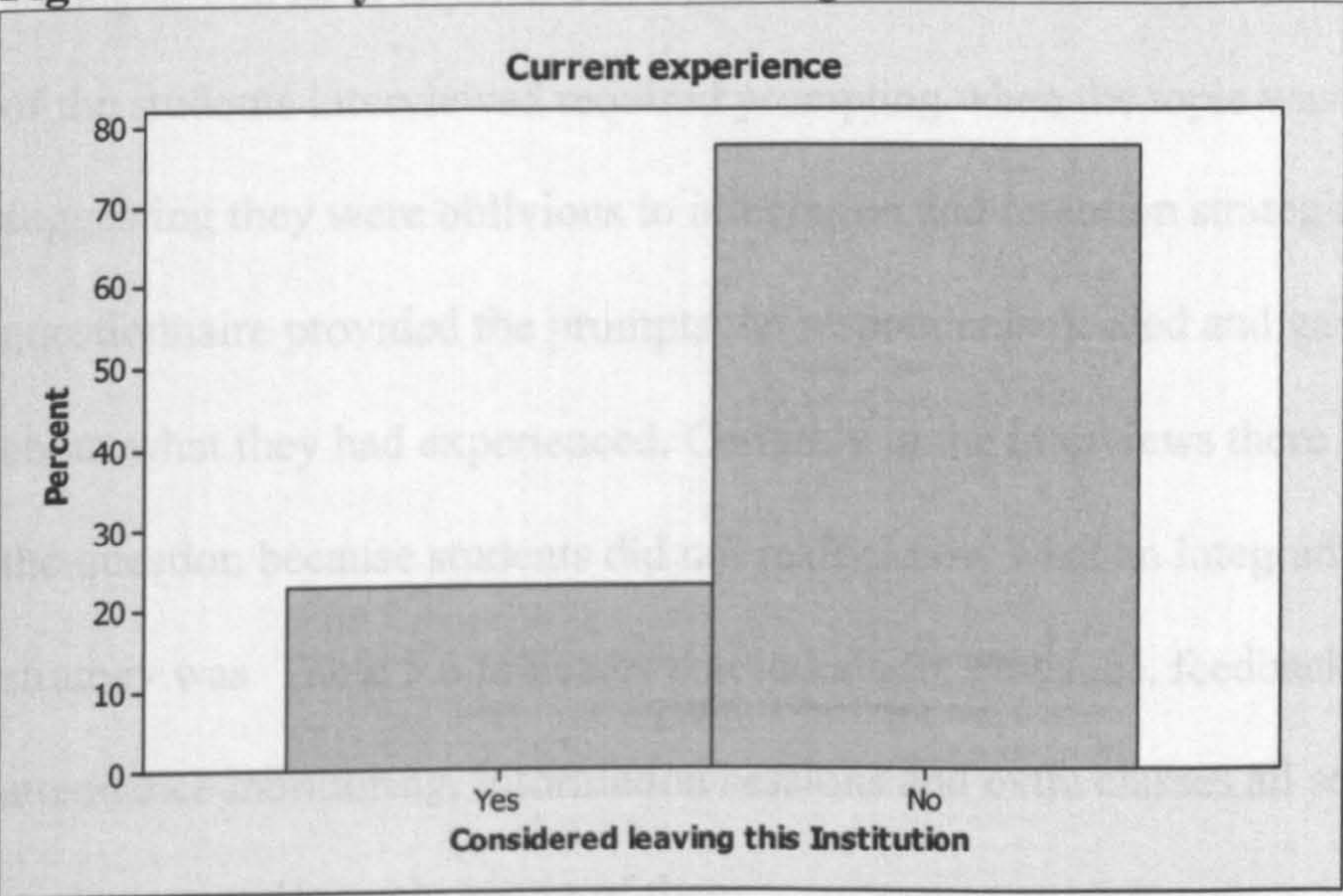


Table 5.5 indicates that students are confident they will pass their year. Year 1 students have an average score of 9.179 which indicates that they will progress to year 2, the year 2 students have an average of 8.393 again still very confident they will progress to year 3, and year 3 students have an average of 9.9474 indicating that they are also very confident they will finish their degree. The results are not surprising when we consider the students providing the response are in semester 2 of their course and can see they are on track, they are able to see they are near the end and they are students who have stayed with the course and have had few problems.

Table 5.5 Descriptive Statistics: Student Certainty to Complete Course.

Variable	Year	N	N*	Mean	SE Mean	StDev	Minimum	Q1
Complete course	1	28	0	9.179	0.247	1.307	5.000	9.000
	2	28	0	8.393	0.409	2.166	1.000	8.000
	3	19	0	9.9474	0.0526	0.2294	9.0000	10.0000
N for								
Variable	Year	Median	Q3	Maximum	IQR	Mode	Mode	
Complete course	1	10.000	10.000	10.000	1.000	10	17	
	2	9.000	10.000	10.000	2.000	10	11	
	3	10.0000	10.0000	10.0000	0.0000	10	18	

Integration and retention strategies

Table 5.6 (page 129) indicates that students are aware of integration and retention strategies and have experienced a number of them. This is interesting because almost all of the students interviewed required prompting when the topic was discussed, suggesting they were oblivious to integration and retention strategies. Perhaps the questionnaire provided the prompts the respondents needed and gave them time to think about what they had experienced. Certainly in the interviews there was confusion over the question because students did not really know what an integration or retention strategy was. Table 5.6 indicates that induction, guidance, feedback, mock assessments, attendance monitoring, information sessions and extra classes all score highly, so students are obviously aware of them.

Table 5.6 Integration and retention strategies experienced.

	Percentage
Information session	30.6
Pre-entry guidance	10.6
Entry tests	4
Induction	69.3
Bridging courses	6.6
Guidance	57.3
Attendance monitoring	33.3
Self help groups	16
Peer support	10.6
Adjusted teaching approaches	13.3
Extra classes	21.3
Feedback on progress	68
Mock assessments	68
Academic support	1.3
Counselling	5.3
Development of study skills	12
Student support services	29.3
Social events	16

Table 5.7 is more revealing in that it shows which integration and retention strategies are seen as useful and relevant to students. Induction, guidance, extra classes, mock assessments and feedback all score highly.

Table 5.7 Integration and retention strategies found to be the most useful by students

	Percentage
Information session	17.3
Pre-entry guidance	2.6
Entry tests	1.3
Induction	40
Bridging courses	1.3
Guidance	24
Attendance monitoring	9.3
Self help groups	8
Peer support	1.3
Adjusted teaching approaches	6.6
Extra classes	21.3
Feedback on progress	36
Mock assessments	49.3
Academic support	1.3
Counselling	1.3
Development of study skills	4
Student support services	12
Social events	4

External influences on students – finance

The questionnaire results indicate that 80% of the students work part-time. The 20% of students not involved in part-time working are supported by their family or partners.

Table 5.8 Descriptive Statistics: Hours worked split by degree year

Variable	Year	N	N*	Mean	SE Mean	StDev	Minimum	Q1	Median
Hours worked	1	23	5	16.00	1.25	6.00	8.00	12.00	16.00
	2	23	5	19.61	1.26	6.06	8.00	16.00	20.00
	3	15	4	16.00	1.59	6.14	5.00	10.00	17.00
N for									
Variable	Year	Q3		Maximum	IQR	Mode		Mode	
Hours worked	1	19.00		30.00	7.00	8, 12, 15		3	
	2	24.00		33.00	8.00	20		6	
	3	21.00		23.00	11.00	20, 23		3	

Table 5.8 shows the average hours worked by year 1 students is 16, the range of hours worked is between 8 and 30 hours. Year 2 students have an average of 19.61 hours with a range between 8 and 33 hours. Year 3 students have an average of 16 hours with a range between 5 and 23 hours. The findings correlate with those found in the student interviews. Students spend more time involved in part-time work than they do in class, the part-time hours worked are at least 16 hours per week. It might be that the hours stated in the interviews and questionnaire results are actually higher in reality because students might not want to tell the truth. This might be because students are concerned about telling the interviewer the truth because it reflects on how much time they have for their studies and might show a lack of commitment to their studies. In many cases the students are asked to work more hours and feel obliged to take the work. So students are giving their average hours worked and might even provide a figure that seems acceptable to the interviewer. This is down to the relationship the student has with the interviewer and the fact the interviewer represents the College and they might be concerned about how the College might see the hours they spend in part-time work.

Interviewed students indicated their need for part-time work and would be concerned that the College might start to influence the hours available for work because it has the power to timetable classes. Table 5.9 indicates that female students spend an average of 16.2 hours in part-time work which fits with the average displayed in table 5.8.

Table 5.9 Descriptive Statistics: Hours worked split by gender.

Variable	Gender	N	N*	Mean	SE Mean	StDev	Minimum	Q1	Median
Hours worked	Female	39	10	16.205	0.972	6.071	5.000	10.000	16.000
	Male	22	4	19.41	1.29	6.05	8.00	15.75	19.50
N for									
Variable	Gender	Q3		Maximum	IQR	Mode	Mode		
Hours worked	Female	20.000		33.000	10.000	20	7		
	Male	24.00		30.00	8.25	20, 24	3		

Male students work an average of 19.41 hours. Female students work the longest hours with a mode of 20 hours (7 female students), the maximum of 33 hours is worked by a female student.

Table 5.10 indicates the hours worked by age group. Students in the 16-19 age group work an average of 16 hours, students in the 20-25 age group work an average of 18.54 hours, students in the 26-30 year age group work an average of 20.20 hours. So it appears the average hours worked increases in relation to age.

Table 5.10 Descriptive Statistics: Hours worked by age group

Variable	Age	N	N*	Mean	SE Mean	StDev	Minimum	Q1	Median
Hours worked	16-19	31	8	16.032	0.984	5.480	8.000	12.000	16.000
	20-25	24	5	18.54	1.24	6.05	8.00	15.25	20.00
	26-30	5	0	20.20	4.69	10.50	5.00	10.50	20.00
	31-40	1	1	16.000	*	*	16.000	*	16.000
N for									
Variable	Age	Q3		Maximum	IQR	Mode	Mode		
Hours worked	16-19	20.000		30.000	8.000	8, 18	4		
	20-25	22.50		33.00	7.25	20	6		
	26-30	30.00		30.00	19.50	30	2		
	31-40	*		16.000	*	*	0		

There is only one student in the sample in the 31-40 age range and the hours worked are 16 which contradicts the previous statement but could be discounted as it is only one student. Certainly tables 5.8, 5.9 and 5.10 provide a reasonable description of the average hours worked and the range of hours worked. The findings from the student interviews also match the part-time hours worked. Older or mature students tend to rely on their partners more for financial help but they still work 16 hours per week. The questionnaire also explored students' views on debt and the source of students' finance. Table 5.11 indicates the multiple sources of finance for students. It is clear that student loans provide the largest source of finance but equally parents/guardians and work are also main sources. The finance source referred to as 'Work' was possibly a confusing one in that the respondents might have thought it related to their work place sponsoring them through a course or the fact they worked part-time to support their studies. The questionnaire targeted full-time students so the most likely interpretation of the term 'Work' would be part-time work as the finance source. Student services also scored highly as a source of finance and this would refer to the student hardship fund which is administered by them to support childcare and student welfare issues.

Table 5.11 Source of Financial Support

	Percentage
Student services	21.3
Parents/Guardians	40
Work	41.3
Friends	1.3
Student loans	56
Bank	5.3
Other	6.6 SAAS, 1.3 Partner

Certainly part-time work is a major source of student funds. Finance would be expected to be a major worry for students due to the number of hours worked. Surprisingly only 36% of the students were concerned about debt. This implies that students are not

concerned about debt, perhaps it has now become an accepted part of being a student that you will be in debt. Figure 5.6 looks at debt in relation to age and gender.

Figure 5.6 Student concern about debt

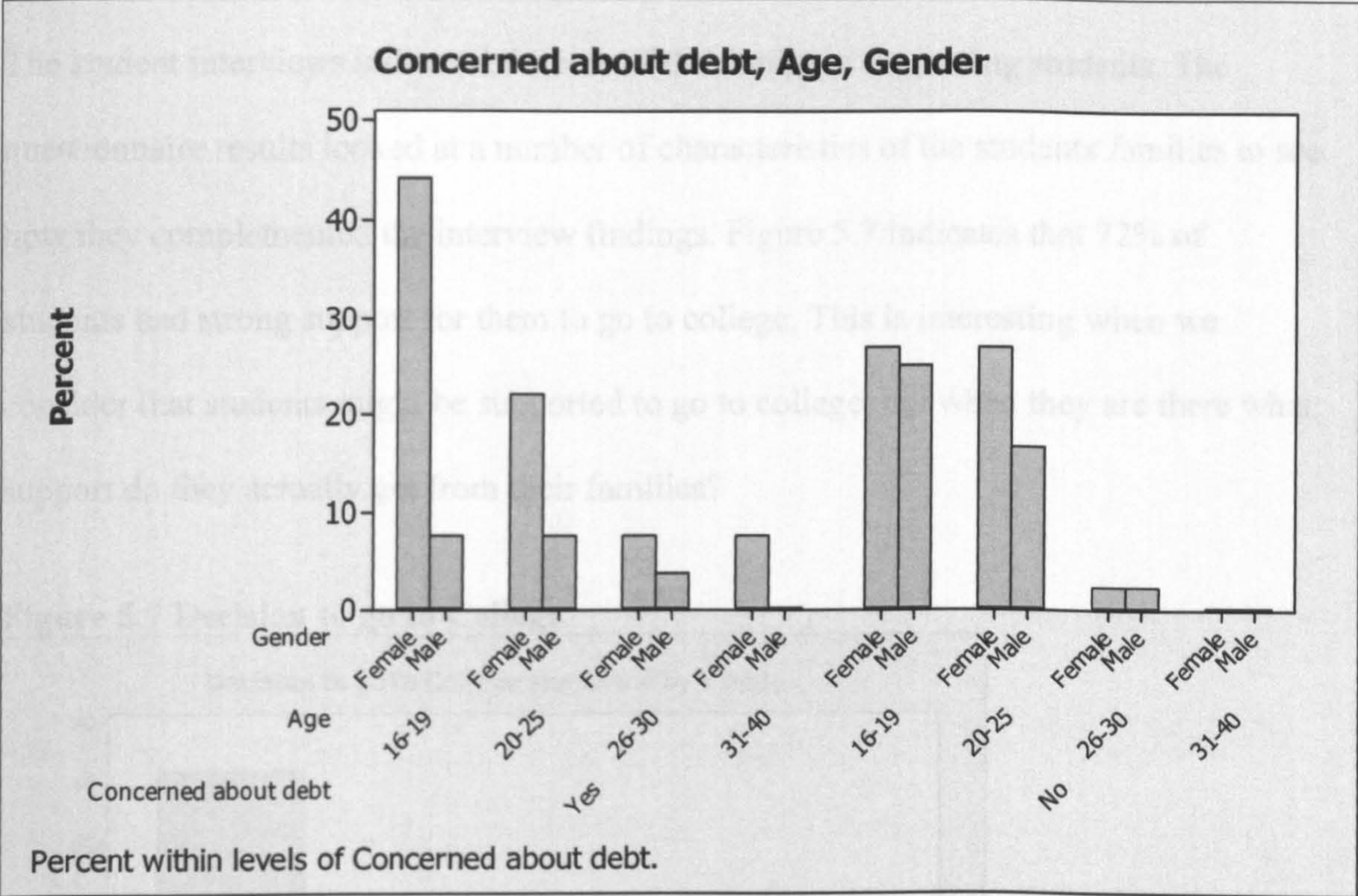


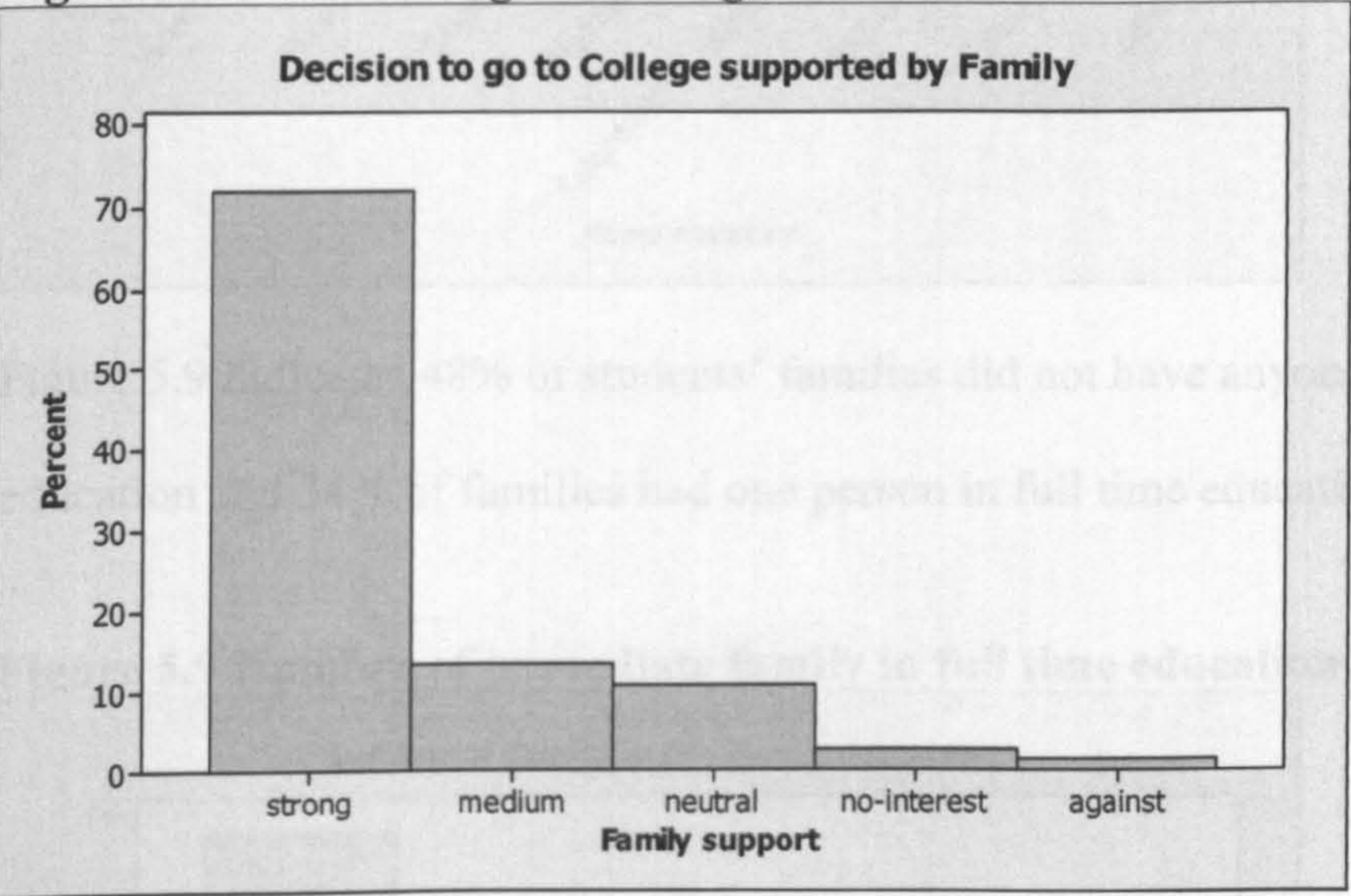
Figure 5.6 is interesting in that female students in the age groups 16-19 and 20-25 are concerned about debt. The female age group 16-19 is certainly the most concerned about debt. Male students do not appear to be concerned about debt. The student interviews indicate that students are accustomed to part-time working and debt is present but seen as part of being a student. The questionnaire results indicate students see sacrifice as a part of debt, they need to sacrifice their studies for money to avoid debt, several students compared what they earned before they were in College and again talked in terms of sacrifice, what had been given up to come to College. Some students indicated they refused to get in debt, and some had 2 jobs. So there are links between the student interviews and the data from the questionnaires. The findings from figure

5.6 may well correlate with the hours worked by female students. The students unconcerned about debt appear to be similar across age groups and gender.

External influences in students - family

The student interviews indicated the role of the family in supporting students. The questionnaire results looked at a number of characteristics of the students families to see how they complemented the interview findings. Figure 5.7 indicates that 72% of students had strong support for them to go to college. This is interesting when we consider that students might be supported to go to college, but when they are there what support do they actually get from their families?

Figure 5.7 Decision to go to College



The questionnaire gathered data on students' home situation to find out if a stable home implied that students might be more inclined to stay on the course because they had background support and no need to worry about meals, accommodation and moral support. Figure 5.8 (page 135) indicates 56% of the students stayed with their parents and 10% staying with one parent. 82% of the students' parents were married, again a possible indicator that there was stability at home. 82% of parents owned or were

buying their house indicating perhaps financial stability, 75% of students had stayed at their current address for more than 3 years. These are all reasonable indicators of a stable background for the student which would be a reason for them continuing with their course. The student interviews indicated in many cases that the students were the first people in their family to enter education.

Figure 5.8 Home situation

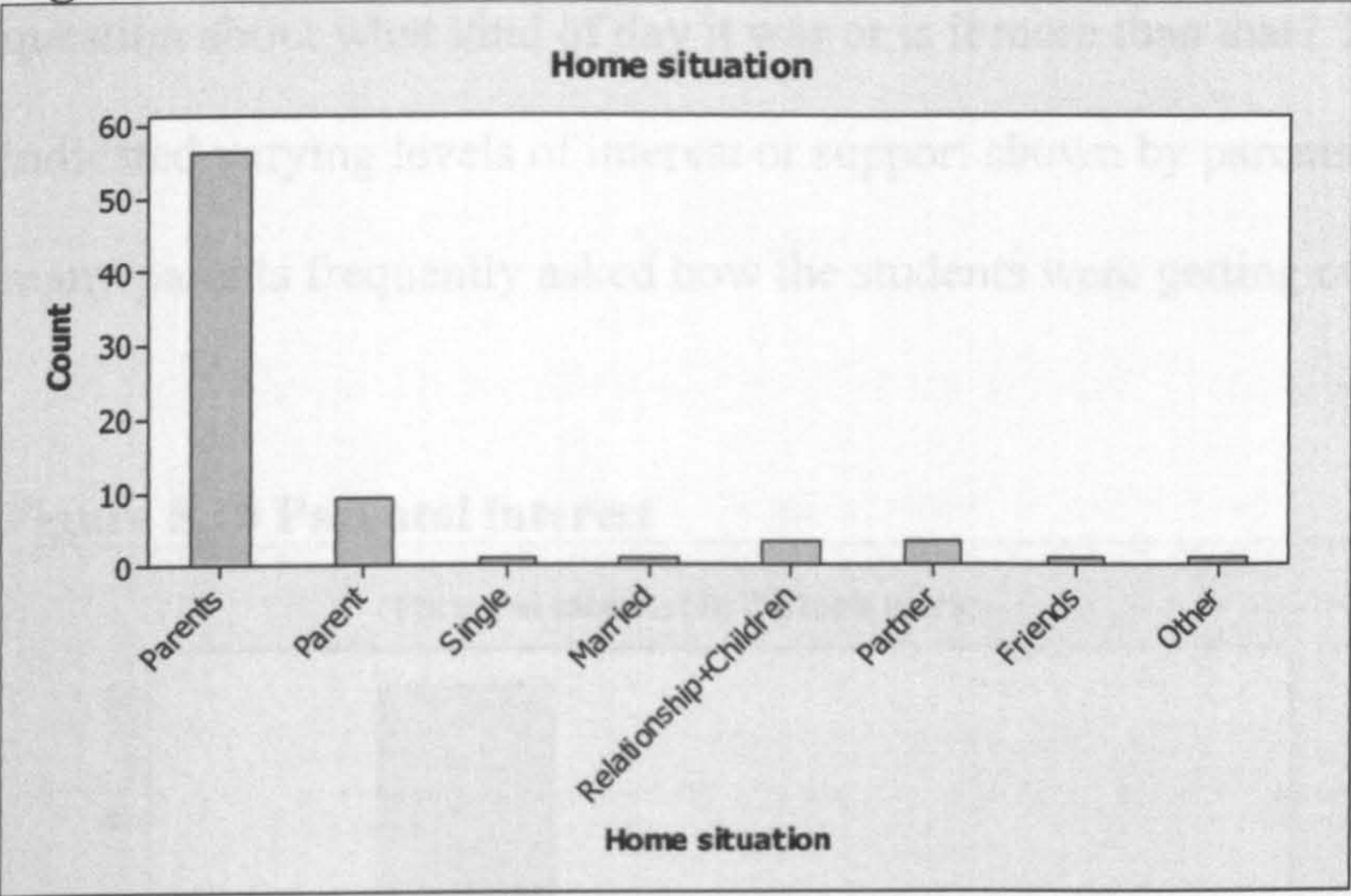
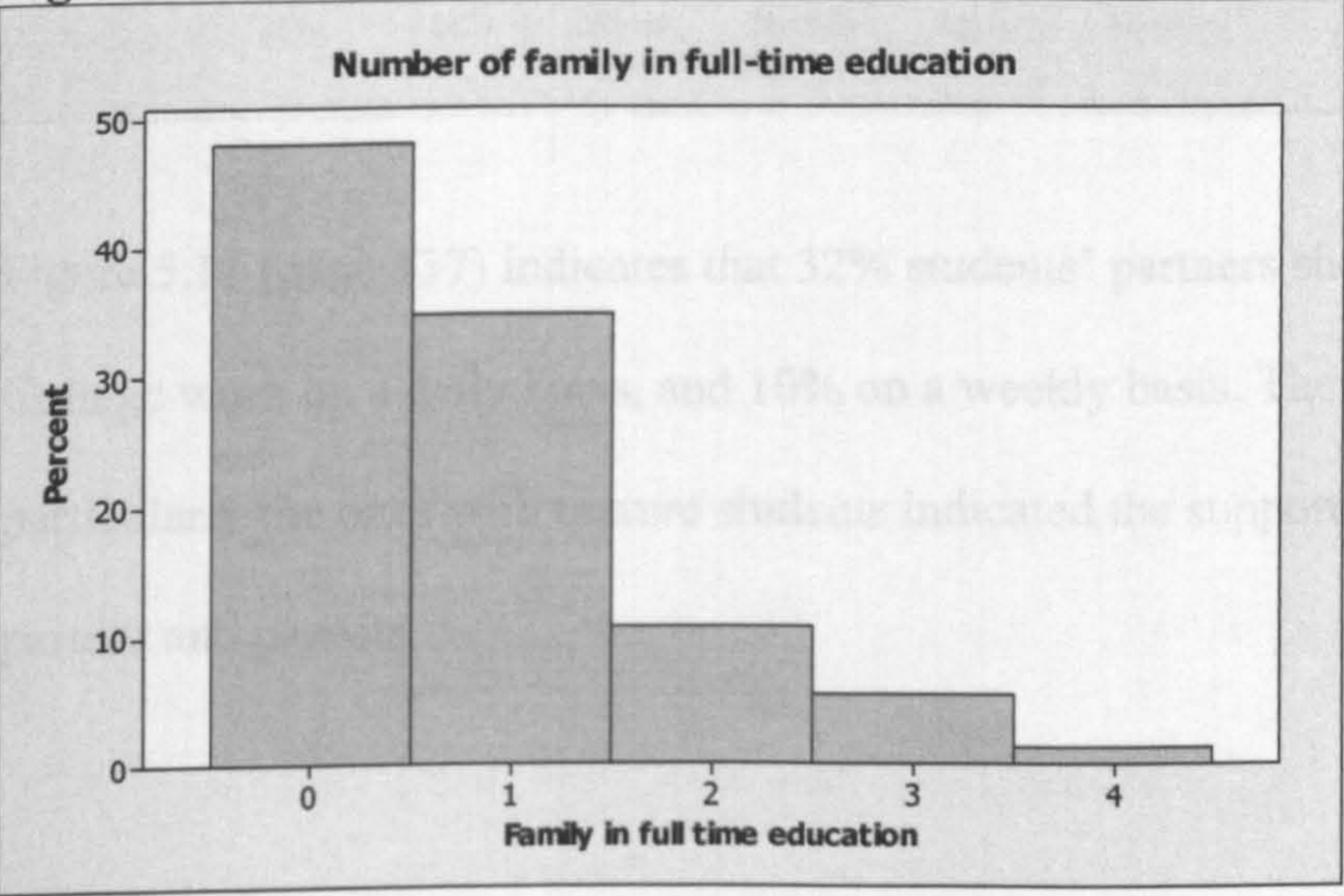


Figure 5.9 indicates 48% of students’ families did not have anyone in full time education and 34% of families had one person in full time education.

Figure 5.9 Number of immediate family in full time education beyond the age of 18



From the questionnaire it was possible that students may have counted themselves as the only person in full time education in their family. So the percentage of first time students in education could be higher than 48%. Data was also collected on the interest shown by partners and parents in students' progress. Figure 5.10 shows that the 78% of students who were still in College had parents showing interest in their work on a daily/weekly basis. What it does not indicate is the form of interest. Is it merely a question about what kind of day it was or is it more than that? The student interviews indicated varying levels of interest or support shown by parents and it was clear that many parents frequently asked how the students were getting on.

Figure 5.10 Parental interest

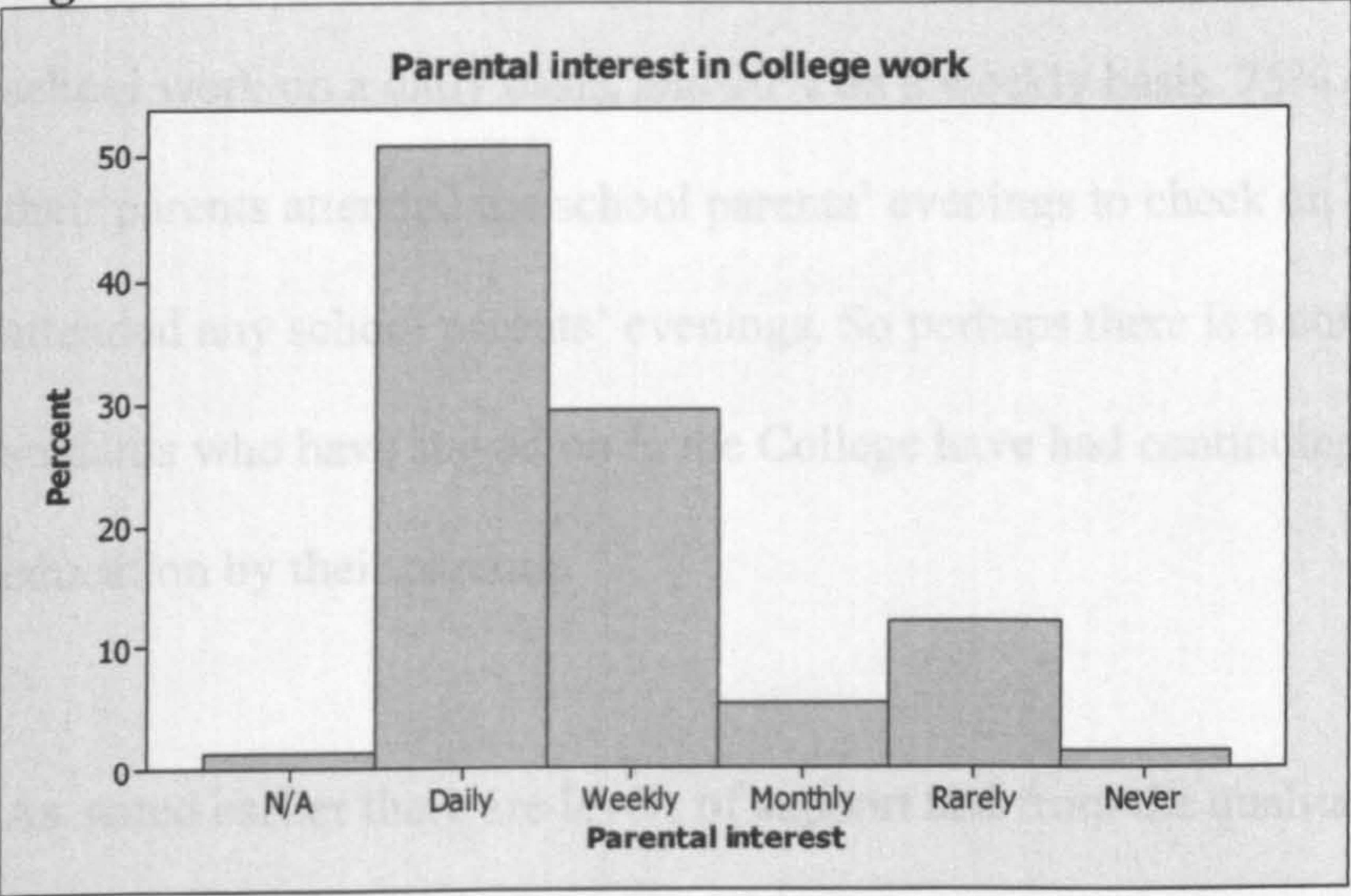
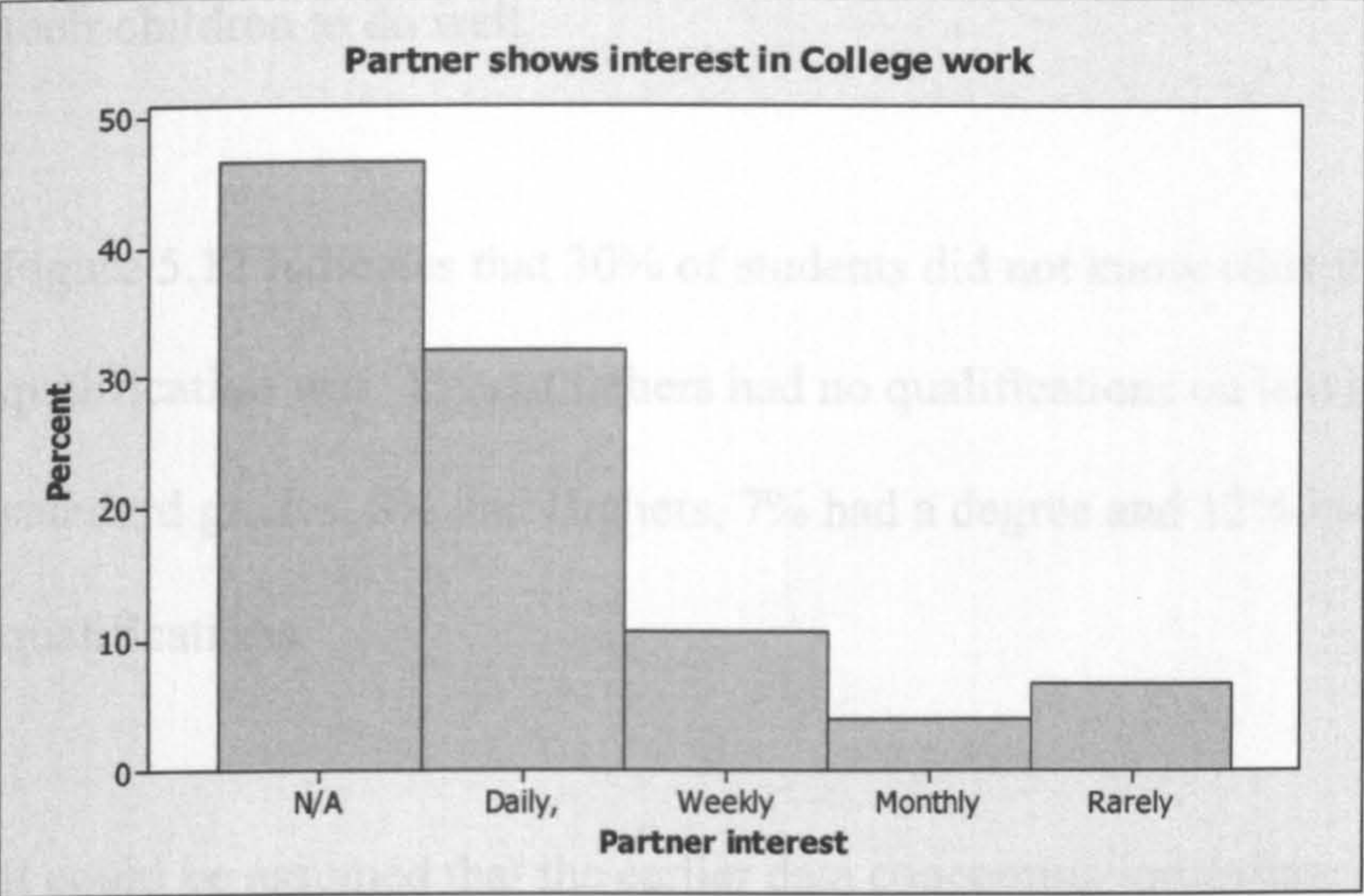


Figure 5.11 (page 137) indicates that 32% students' partners showed an interest in their College work on a daily basis, and 10% on a weekly basis. The student interviews particularly the ones with mature students indicated the support provided by their partner and parents.

examples mirror the interview statements in that there are parents who are very keen for

Figure 5.11 Partner interest



Data from the questionnaire also shows that students’ parents had also shown an interest in their school progress, 60% of the students had parents who showed interest in their school work on a daily basis, and 20% on a weekly basis. 75% of the students indicated their parents attended the school parents’ evenings to check on progress, and 12% never attended any school parents’ evenings. So perhaps there is a consistency that the students who have stayed on in the College have had continuing interest shown in their education by their parents.

As stated earlier there are levels of support and from the qualitative responses in the questionnaires it is clear that some students experience very little support: “None”, “they don’t agree with me being here”, “they ask the basics” are typical statements that are also found in the student interviews. Somewhere in the middle some students experience passive and non-conditional support from parents which is seen as: “meals, rent free shelter”, “space to study”, and “interest in their studies”. At the other end of the spectrum there are parents who are proactive in supporting the students: “they offer babysitting”, “anything I need”, “give me praise”, “give me financial help”. Again these

examples mirror the interview statements in that there are parents who are very keen for their children to do well.

Figure 5.12 indicates that 30% of students did not know what their father's highest qualification was. 15% of fathers had no qualifications on leaving school, 26% at standard grades, 8% had Highers, 7% had a degree and 12% had gained professional qualifications.

It could be assumed that the earlier data concerning immediate family experience of higher education would indicate 7% of the students' fathers had been in Higher education and this experience would help students cope with College, or inform their choice of course a factor that came out of the student interviews.

Figure 5.12 Father's highest qualification



Figure 5.13 Mother’s highest qualification



Figure 5.13 indicates 30% of students did not know what their mother’s highest qualification was. 9% of mothers left school with no qualifications, 26% had standard grades, 12% had Highers, 11% gained a degree and 9% gained professional qualifications. The results indicate the students’ mothers left school with more or higher qualifications than the students’ fathers.

Figure 5.14 Age when Mother left education

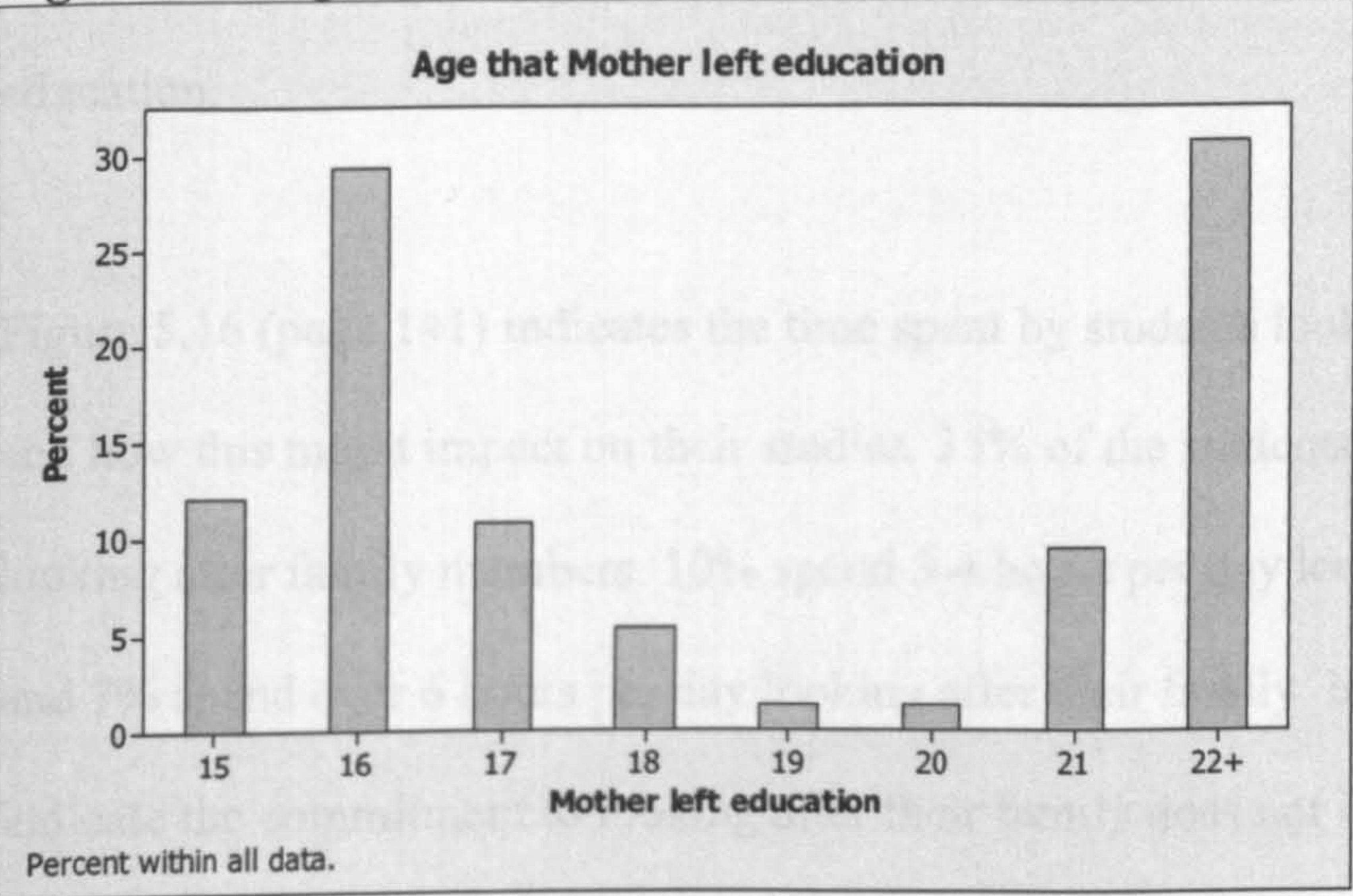


Figure 5.14 indicates that 12% of students' mothers left education at 15, 27% left at 16, 10% at 17, 8% left at 21 and 31% left at 22 or over. So 41% of mothers that left education between the ages of 15-17. 39% of mothers left education after they were 21 indicating that they aimed for higher qualifications.

Figure 5.15 Age when father left education

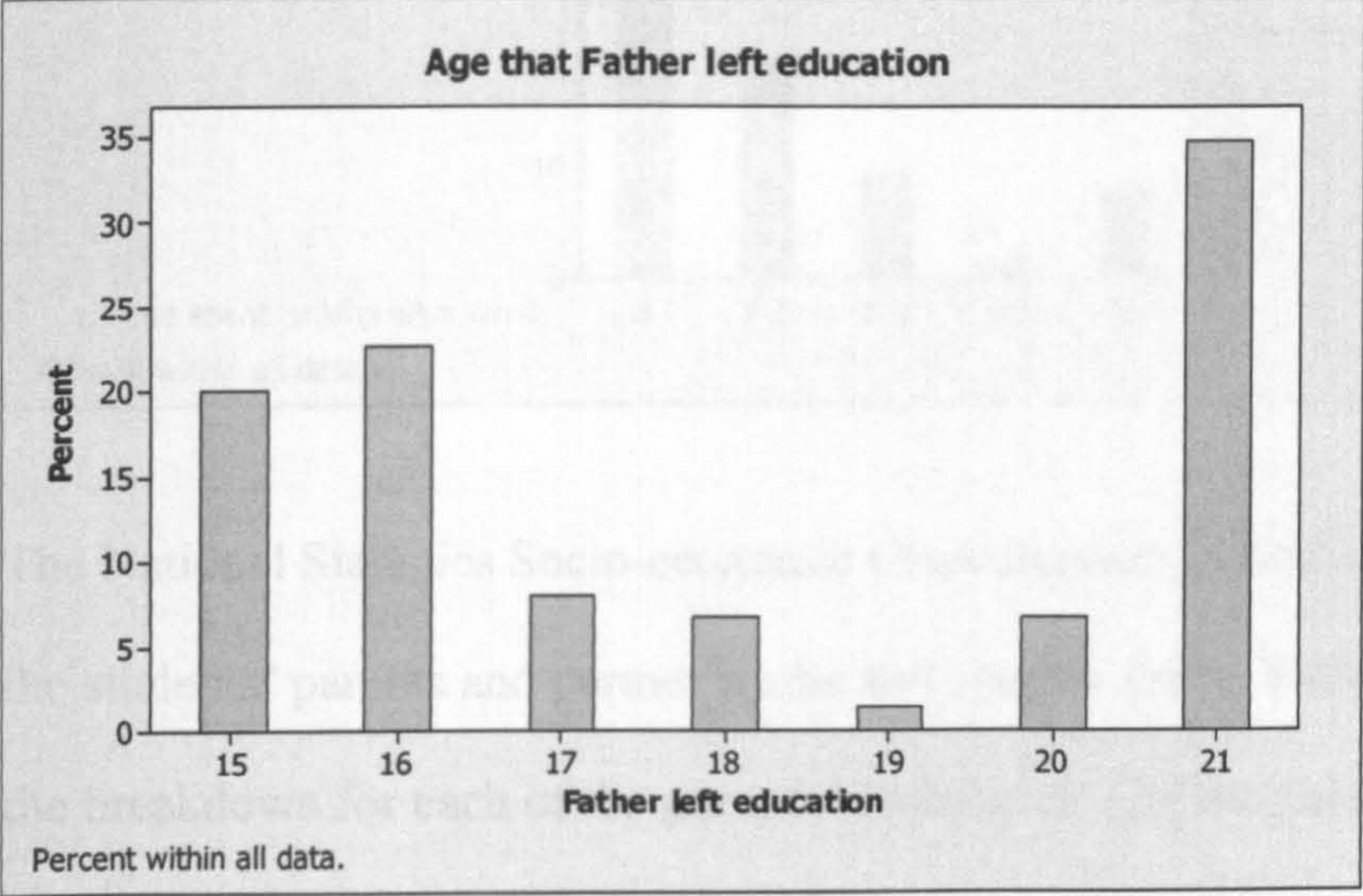
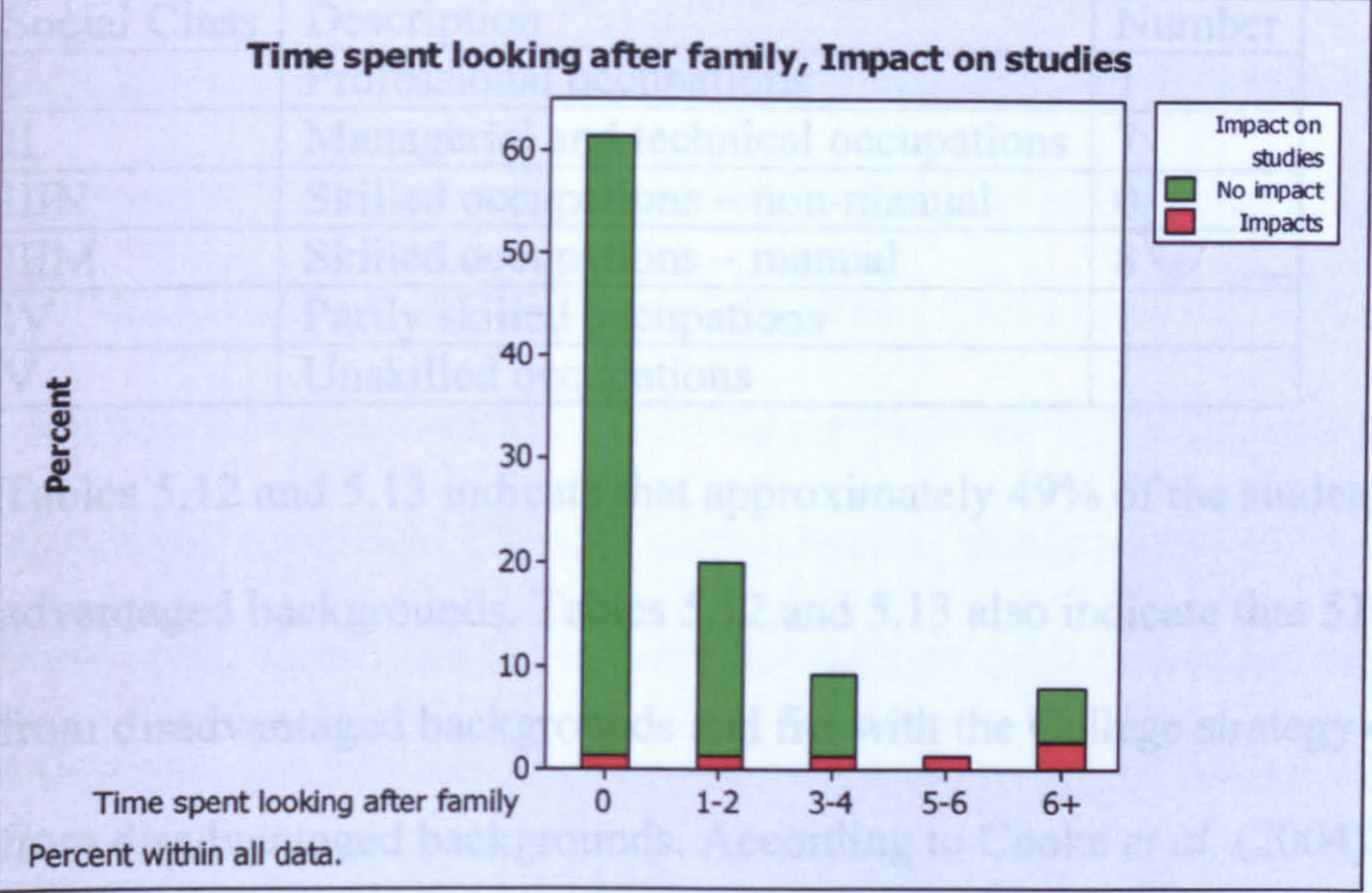


Figure 5.15 indicates 42% of the students' fathers left full time education between the ages of 15-16. 46% of the students' fathers left full time education between the ages of 20-21. Figures 5.14 and 5.15 have similar trends for the ages of parents leaving education.

Table 5.12 Students Parents Social Life - Family background

Figure 5.16 (page 141) indicates the time spent by students looking after their family and how this might impact on their studies. 35% of the students spend time each day looking after family members. 10% spend 3-4 hours per day looking after their family and 7% spend over 6 hours per day looking after their family. In each case the students indicate the commitment to looking after their family does not impact on their studies.

Figure 5.16 Time spent looking after family



The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) was used to analyse the students’ parents and partner’s jobs and classify them. Tables 5.12 and 5.13 show the breakdown for each of the groups. Cooke *et al.* (2004) classed students from professional (I) or intermediate (II) as advantaged, and they classed students from manual skilled (IIIM), partly skilled (IV) and unskilled (V) as disadvantaged. Students from skilled non-manual (IIIN) backgrounds were not seen as particularly advantaged or disadvantaged. This split was used to enable them to analyse their data.

Table 5.12 Students Parents Social class based on the principal earner in the family home

Social Class	Description	Number
I	Professional occupations	5
II	Managerial and technical occupations	29
IIIN	Skilled occupations – non-manual	13
IIIM	Skilled occupations – manual	16
IV	Partly Skilled occupations	5
V	Unskilled occupations	1

(5 unknown)

Table 5.13 Students Partners Social class

Social Class	Description	Number
I	Professional occupations	1
II	Managerial and technical occupations	7
IIIN	Skilled occupations – non-manual	0
IIIM	Skilled occupations – manual	8
IV	Partly skilled occupations	1
V	Unskilled occupations	1

Tables 5.12 and 5.13 indicate that approximately 49% of the students come from advantaged backgrounds. Tables 5.12.and 5.13 also indicate that 51% of students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and fits with the College strategy of attracting students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Cooke *et al.* (2004) students from disadvantaged backgrounds would not have parents who had been to university, would be in paid employment and would be less likely to be involved in non-academic activities and would also spend less time socialising per week compared with students from advantaged backgrounds. The student interviews appear to contradict Cooke *et al.* (2004) because it is clear nearly all of the students in the Business School at Thistle College are in part-time work and very few are involved in College non-academic activities. Certainly the data in tables 5.12 and 5.13 indicate there are students from disadvantaged backgrounds and this would be likely due to the wider access policies operated by Thistle College, and the data in chart 5.9 from the questionnaire indicates there are many students who are entering higher education for the first time which corresponds with these policies.

Staff interviews

Interviews were held with academic staff and a number of themes emerged. A number of staff held the view that the students of today did not have the same skills and abilities as students in the past. This theme is referred to as ‘The Spectrum of Ability’.

In days gone by students came to College and started at the same point, they had similar skill levels and abilities. Now they are starting at different levels, they have a broad spectrum of the pre-requisites needed for studying at University. This means some will find the transition into HE harder than others. There are a higher number of students with poor academic ability. Academic staff can not make assumptions about students' abilities or education. The staff cannot assume students have the basic skills. Staff cannot take students as far as they used to or as quickly because they have to put more effort and time into bringing them up to speed. Instead of teaching their specialist subject they are teaching the basics by default. English language and numerical skills are very poor. The staff felt the Scottish Higher qualifications are no longer what they used to be. There is a distance in terms of ability between the students and it takes more effort to get them all to the same place. Students need a lot more support in the work they do, more spoon feeding is needed and it can take them a long time to get into their work:

A lot people coming into the CertHE need a lot more support in the work they do. They are looking for a spoon feeding approach a lot of them.

(Joe, lecturer, 20 years)

I have been in the Business School for 16 years. There are probably a higher number of students with poor academic ability now than in the time when entry was more restricted.

(Gillian, lecturer, 16 years)

I believe the amount of pre-requisites they come in with is a lot less than they used to be. ...if you like, the pre-requisites are at a starting point further back so you cannot take the student as far as some of the ones you used to.

(Rob, lecturer, 18 years)

Life experience is another characteristic that students bring to the College that influences their ability to cope:

Mature students are apprehensive at first and after six weeks start to settle down. At first they feel inferior to those coming out of school because it's a long time since they have been an educational environment. They don't value their life experience, they don't see the experience of working, bringing up a family and mature approach to studying as advantages over the younger students.

(Joe, lecturer, 20 years)

Younger students believe they already know the stuff, they think they have done it at school already. The problem is they don't know what they don't know. It is assumed younger students have more life experience than they actually have, their life experience is limited and there are many general things about the world they don't know about or understand. The assumed knowledge or experience can hinder their College work if they are too shy to advertise they don't understand something in front of the rest of the class.

(Alice, lecturer, 16 years)

The drive for social inclusion by the College also brings in students who are starting at a different level and this needs more resources. The institution's drive for numbers places less emphasis on students' skills and abilities and they don't look at the pre-requisites as

much. The problem has not been a sudden one but a continual year on year increment in which the gap between students' abilities has been widening.

Lecturers' expectations of how students should behave as students are based on their own experience as a student:

You had to work hard to get into University, it was a privilege to be there. You were self sufficient, you worked on your own more and you were not spoon fed. You worked hard to pass. Now because anyone can pop along and enrol it is not the same. It doesn't have the same Kudos, it is just something they are doing. They are not thinking in the long term.

(Don, lecturer, 25 years)

I had clear goals of why I went to University, I might not have had an idea of what I would do when I finished but I knew why I was there.

(Rob, lecturer, 18 years)

University was a community, it was integrated, you went to class, went to social events and played sports, all part of the same environment. Halls of residence mixed people up, you met all students from all disciplines and made friends outside of your discipline. Part-time work was available and was nice to have just to tide things over but it was not a necessity. More time was spent in the University, gaps in the timetable were utilised for studying and the library was busy. As a student you made do, you were skint and you did not expect to have all the latest things. You shopped cheaply, your digs were crummy and you did not expect to go on great holidays or own a car.

(Don, lecturer, 25 years)

I feel they are looking to be given as much as they possibly can. Their attitude has changed from years ago when they were willing to go and work for themselves. They want you to teach them to the exams, rather than think for themselves. I don't think it is their fault it is the way they have been taught at school.

(Bob, lecturer, 16 years)

Now have a smaller percentage who have taken responsibility for their own work and achieving qualifications, and a large majority who don't.

(Ruth, lecturer, 23 years)

The expectations of the students in this institution, they expect to do less. They expect us to do more, they expect to pass regardless if they attend well or whether they apply themselves. They expect to pass, it is just going to happen, almost like they have been brought up in this way.

(Ruth, lecturer, 23 years)

Looking at their performance half of them did not study at all because I am getting people who got 10% and 12% in the exam and it is obvious they have not done any revision. But they have still got the expectation they will pass. People were leaving my exam (early) and I was escorting them out and these people were thinking they had done quite well and these people were rubbish.

(Don, lecturer, 25 years)

I think it is the culture from school they bring with them. I say you have got to read the text books, you have got to read the relevant chapters. The day release and night school most of them (students) did and used to ask to discuss things in class from the text book, but the full timers did not.

(Don, lecturer, 25 years)

I think that the expectations of some students have changed in that they are more vocal in their expectations of information from lecturers in terms of what is required. For example in exam revision a few stop short of asking for the actual questions.

(Gillian, lecturer, 16 years)

In school they are taught to pass exams and they want that to happen in here. They don't want to learn anything extra. They don't want knowledge for the sake of knowledge. They don't even see the skills needed for work. It can be disheartening.

(Sally, lecturer, 18 years)

Another aspect of the changing student expectations is the level of institutional commitment required by them. There is a change in the relationship between the student and the institution. One lecturer felt the students treated the College like a drop in centre. This is a good analogy because it gives the impression that the College is a place you go when you can be bothered to go, it is optional. People don't feel obliged to go if there is something else better to do. Dropping in implies short periods of commitment and limited use of facilities for an intense period of time. A drop in facility is about flexibility, catching up, doing something informally. Dropping in implies fitting in with other commitments. It has to be worthwhile when you drop in. So classes have to be interesting, lectures can't be dull or boring. If you drop in you want to get what you need and go, don't want to have to wait around. Students want instant access to lecturers and they are expected to be available when the students come in. If lecturers are too busy to see students then they are construed by them as being unfriendly and unhelpful.

Students dislike timetables with gaps, time is seen as precious and any time not being taught is seen as wasteful because it can be used for other things. Timetables with gaps

are seen as bad or poorly structured or poorly organised because it does not meet students' needs. Students want to be in and out of College quickly. Students want to have full days in College so that time is freed off for work:

They get their timetable and build their shifts round it or look at it and actually try and get their classes built around their shifts. They come and tell me they can't come on a certain afternoon and can they change classes and so they sit in other classes.

(Meg, lecturer, 18 years)

If you give them an hour gap (in the timetable) they complain about that so they can finish early. The gap is for going to the library or to meet up for group work. But they are not happy because they want to finish early.

(Meg, lecturer, 18 years)

Missing classes, students consider their part-work to be too important now and think nothing at all of even saying to you, and years ago they would never had. Even when I was a student I never dreamed of saying to a lecturer I will not be in tomorrow I am working. They are happy to tell you that, not embarrassed at all. They don't even say sorry I won't be in. The message is my work is more important than my course.

(Ruth, lecturer, 23 years)

Students don't like badly structured timetables. They don't want to hang about and they don't want gaps in the timetable. They don't see these gaps as time for the library. The gaps are not used wisely.

(Lorna, lecturer, 16 years)

Students now compartmentalise their lives into three areas, these are work, College and socialising. They are not integrated but three separate environments. The College is seen as a place to go to for their studies and lectures. There is less social interaction in the College apart from what happens in class. The need to meet work commitments means students limit their contact with the College to lectures only. The implication is that the student experience now differs from those students in the past because they socialised and became part of the institutions community through clubs and sports.

The lecturers' construct of the way their student life used to be shapes their view of how student life is now and causes a conflict in the expectations they have of students which contrasts with students' expectations of HE. The two have differing values, attitudes and perceptions of what it is to be a student. The lecturers make decisions on what is best for students based on this construct. Lecturers will decide on the level of support they will provide based on the effort put in by the students:

I help them because they have done their bit. Staff know who is not doing it (academic work) and get frustrated.

(Sally, lecturer, 18 years)

If I have students that are genuine cases, trying to make an effort I will help them.

Others that don't make an effort to work or attend – hand in stuff late, come at the end and ask what is in the exam. Do I look like I have mug tattooed across my forehead?

(Ruth, lecturer, 23 years)

A number of the lecturers and students indicated that the Business School and the institution needed to be strict with students that did not attend College on a regular

basis. This included students who did not perform well in exams or coursework. It was stated that by making an example of some students would lead to the remaining students taking their course seriously. This is an alternative strategy to gaining student commitment that involves punishment and reprisal rather than the normal supportive strategies:

Years ago we had certain course leaders kept a close rein on the students. It is not as tight as it used to be. There is no threat against them now and they are rarely put off the course. They didn't enforce the traffic light system, a pointless exercise if you are not going to follow things up. It was a lot of work for staff. More prestigious places can afford rules and regulations, we don't have that, we can't enforce attendance.

(Bob, lecturer, 16 years)

When I was a student tutorials were compulsory and you got bollocked for not attending, but now there are no sanctions.

(Don, lecturer, 28 years)

What we had in the past we used to have a review of student performance at Christmas and students we felt were struggling we got them in and talked to them. If you like we gave them a warning – you better get your finger out or else. That tended to work, you were only talking about a dozen from the business school but you might save eight or nine of them because you put the frighteners on them.

... now we need to be a bit more heavy handed in respect of guidance interviews and attendance to make students realise the importance of what they are doing and what the consequences are if they don't do them.

(Don, lecturer, 28 years)

Students complain to me in class about students who are working the system. They stay off or come in late always full of excuses and want me to go over what they have missed and this takes away time from those who have been coming to class and are waiting for me to teach them. The good students find it very frustrating and want me to deal with the bad students, you lose credibility because nothing gets done about them.

(Morag, lecturer, 13 years)

Integration and retention strategies

The staff interviews correlate with the earlier statements from the students indicating that there is a raft of integration and retention initiatives adopted by the Business School. Some of them are formal, some informal, they are not evaluated. The College uses a student satisfaction survey to get an overview of the student experience and information from this may allow some evaluation of the integration and retention strategies. At school level the course leaders produce Course Board reports and staff indicated that these could be used as a mechanism to evaluate the integration and retention strategies. In most cases the reports were prepared then filed away. The success of the integration and retention initiatives are difficult to gauge and there is no systematic approach to the strategies. Integration and retention initiatives are not discussed between schools and the staff interviews indicate that there are examples of initiatives being adopted that failed in other schools that go on to fail in the Business School. Many initiatives are driven by the need to show outside bodies that you are following particular policies and this overrides the benefit of the policies because it is part of an audit trail or linked to funding:

Proving you are doing something is not the same as proving you are doing something well. The ability to trace back the process becomes more important than the outcome of the activity.

(Rob, lecturer, 18 years)

Pre-entry guidance is not a retention strategy as such but more a process for ensuring students are directed to the right course and it is considered that if students know what they are signing up for they are more likely to stay on course; it is an integration strategy. Staff indicated that student interviews used to be carried out but have been phased out. Open evening and open days allow students to be given advice on the qualifications they may need to get before they can join a course and also what courses are suitable for them. Open days near the beginning of the first semester are the last chance for late entrants to join courses and interviews help direct students to appropriate courses. Lecturers see these late entrants as people grasping at straws and at times under pressure from parents to be doing something. These particular students have no real idea of what they want to do:

It is left to the lecturer's professionalism to explore the needs of these students and direct them to a suitable course, they need to be honest. It is better to tell students they are unsuitable for a course, the course content and about the realistic job prospects than have them drop out later when they realise the course is not as they expected.

(Lorna, lecturer, 16 years)

Some integration and retention strategies are formalised in the Business School. There is a policy on student guidance and lecturers are allocated student groups to provide academic guidance. Guidance works well when the lecturer takes the student group for

some of their classes because they get to know the group, they have a rapport with them and students do not feel wary of taking part. The guidance process is not easy and staff are cynical about it:

Guidance is seen by many students as a waste of time. The good students who don't need guidance are the ones who participate, some of the good students vote with their feet by not turning up because they feel they don't need it.

(Lorna, lecturer 16 years)

The students who do need guidance are not in College so fail to turn up.

(Ruth, lecturer 23 years)

I have provided guidance but find that ongoing guidance, when required, is more helpful.

(Gillian, lecturer, 16 years)

Guidance is an optional activity for students so that is why it is not valued. It takes up time in their timetable when they could be working, it has no links with any subject credit and there is no reward for taking part. The student interviews show that students perceive guidance as something only for students who are struggling. Students talk to each other and this influences their view of guidance. Some lecturers see guidance as a waste of time and frustrating because the students don't show up for interviews:

...soul destroying when no one turned up and you just sat there.

(Rob, Lecturer, 18 years)

Lecturers can become cynical and see guidance as a box ticking exercise. The guidance process is not evaluated and assumptions are made by management that it is happening and there are no checks to see when and how guidance is carried out. Originally guidance was not put on lecturers' timetables so time had to be made to incorporate guidance into lecturers' duties. This caused resentment because guidance was seen as not important enough to be recognised on the timetable. The Business School's approach to implementing guidance has resulted in differing levels of effective guidance and is left at the discretion of lecturers in how it is carried out. To avoid the problem of students not attending guidance some lecturers carry out guidance during class time so that students are captured. This approach has ensured students have taken part in guidance but at the cost of eating into teaching time and is perceived as time-wasting by students.

Guidance also takes place informally due to the accessibility of lecturing staff. Lecturing staff provide informal guidance in the class room, corridor, canteen, library, almost anywhere and thus at a time that suits the student. The availability of informal guidance supplements the formal guidance process to the point of undermining it. The informal guidance process is a reasonable approach for students to solve problems if the lecturer is one they can approach. The Business School does not evaluate the informal approach although it is recognised as pastoral care.

Student attendance is always monitored. Up until recently the Business School focused on student attendance initiative referred to as the Traffic Light System. This involved lecturers monitoring student attendance and collating student attendance over all of their classes, the school administration then sent out letters to the students. Red letters were

sent out to students with very poor attendance indicating they needed to come in for an interview, orange letters were sent out to students whose attendance was a concern and green letters sent out to students who had very good attendance. Students who got green letters wondered why they got a letter for being good. Those students who got orange and red letters commented that their parents were not in when the letters arrived so it had no impact. The Traffic Light System was an approach borrowed from another school but there was no dialogue between the schools on its pros and cons before it was considered as a strategy. It was not evaluated during or after its implementation so management did not know how effective it was:

The Traffic Light System has not worked. We tried really hard but it didn't have much impact. I think there are certain students it would make no difference to. You might save a few.

(Ruth, lecturer, 23 years)

Student induction is another strategy that is used to integrate students into the Business School. The school has tried to make the induction week as compact as possible so it is not a waste of time for students. The induction week is now two and a half days. Quite a lot is crammed into the induction. Students take part in icebreakers to get to know their classmates. They meet their Head of School and course leaders. Student support services provide information on finance, childcare and study support. Students enrol and get information about their semester and also get practice using the virtual learning environments that are part of their studies. So a very intense information period for students that prepares them for what is to come in the first semester. There is no social side to the induction week, there are no clubs to join or events being run. So students come in to enrol, take part and go away. The induction week is not evaluated in depth

but changes are made in response to the experiences of some staff members. The lack of social community sets up the expectation that the only reason to be in College is to be in lectures, there is no reason to linger.

Feedback is an official policy within the Business School because it is recognised as a means of motivating students. Students are told how they will find out about results. Lecturers brief their students on what their assessment is about and provide feedback on the assessments once they have been marked. Lecturers are given a two week time period to turn around assessments and exams, to enable feedback to be given promptly to students. The feedback works because students are able to see how they are doing and where they need to improve. In some cases it is a wake up call that motivates them to do better and for mature students the feedback provides an indicator that they do belong in College and can cope with the work. Staff interviews indicate that students email and phone staff almost as soon as they have submitted assessments looking for results. This is seen by staff as exceeding student expectations. The feedback strategy is not formally evaluated by the Business School but comments from the staff-student liaison meetings provide some information on its effectiveness.

The staff interviews indicate there are a number of informal activities that relate to integration and retention but are not seen as part of the official approach to integration and retention. Lecturers provide extra unscheduled classes to supplement their teaching. The classes are to supplement the existing ones because students are struggling with concepts, or there is not enough time to get through all of the syllabus, or in response to a revision need before exams. The lecturers indicate that the good students turn up for the extra classes, the weaker students do not always appear. The classes are not

timetabled and are seen as extra so some students do not feel obliged to take them. This is because the classes clash with their part-time work. Lecturers also provide mock tests and these are beneficial as a wake up call. The mock tests are announced in advance and the weaker students don't turn up. The staff interviews indicate that students believe tests should only be used if they have credit attached to them, so the value has to be there for students because the tests eat into their time. The use of tests and mock exams is not universal across the Business School and is left to the individual discretion of the lecturer. The lecturers are self managing and have autonomy in what they do.

Much of the support students receive is down to the relationship they have with their lecturer. This is evident from the student and staff interviews. Students are keen to have a relationship with their lecturer. Many of the lecturers develop and enhance the relationship with their classes through the use of stories and personal/family anecdotes. The lecturer builds trust, empathises and presents a human face to the class by sharing a piece of themselves and thus they are seen as more approachable:

...maybe because the nature of the subject they all know about my kids and grand kids and I think they feel you as human and can relate to that. And they tell you things that are surprising, they will talk about things that are quite personal. They feel they can talk to you.

(Don, lecturer, 25 years)

The kids sit up and take notice when I talk about what I done in the work place, what it is like to be an accountant. I tell them about my daughter struggling in her exams, how she coped. You have got to communicate with them, teaching is a human thing.

(Harris, lecturer, 23 years)

Story telling is used in different ways by staff to engage with the students and explain their subject. Staff share their work and life experiences with the students. The difficulty staff face is maintaining boundaries between themselves and the students, and as such they need to consider how much and what they wish to share.

I was explaining about Health and Safety in the work place and was telling them about my nephew and then I thought maybe I am going to far here, they might know him or know his company, so there are limits to what you can tell them. There should be boundaries between the lecturer and students.

(Sally, lecturer, 15 years)

Staff interviews indicate that lecturers also adjust their teaching approaches if they perceive the existing approach is not engaging students. Many staff try out new initiatives to enhance the delivery of their subject although it is clear from student interviews that not every lecturer is willing to do this or sees the need. Course leaders expect lecturers to flag up to them students who are struggling and this is a two way process as course leaders will also inform lecturers about students who have problems. This is not a formalised process but one instigated by course leaders and comes under the umbrella of pastoral care. The problem this raises is that it is not formal and communication is not consistent so information about students does not get through. Tutors also indicate that even the formal channels did not always work because they sometimes only found out a student had special needs halfway through the module they were delivering. The need for lecturers to fulfil a number of roles to tutor their classes effectively has some resonance with the ten managerial roles put forward by Mintzberg (1990). To effectively meet student expectations lecturers need to engage in

interpersonal, informational and decisional roles. Lecturing staff fulfil the *figurehead role* by representing the College and Business School to their students. The *leader role* comes through the guidance and motivation provided by the lecturer. The *liaison role* comes through the links the lecturer has with other members of staff. The *monitor role* is filled through the lecturer seeking and receiving information about students and the College, being observant of how their class is working. The *disseminator role* comes through the gathering of information internally and externally and sharing it with their students/colleagues. The *spokesperson role* comes through the lecturer transmitting information about their students to the College. The *entrepreneurial role* comes through the initiation of change in teaching/assessment approaches in response to student needs. The *disturbance handler role* relates to the need for the lecturer to solve problems within their module/class room. The *resource allocator role* involves decision making about how to plan and control their programme of work. The *negotiator role* relates to the process in which the lecturer agrees their timetable and programme of work with the students/College. As Mintzberg indicates the ten roles are not easily isolated in practice but are an integrated whole. In a sense the lecturers are self managing their work and in doing so they fulfil a number of the Mintzberg roles. The issue is that lecturers need to develop these roles and the skills required to self manage because they have a lot of autonomy in how they relate and work with students.

The final strand to the Business School integration and retention strategies is the recognition that social integration is important and the school has organised social events for the students to enable them to mix and make friends, also connect with the Business School and its staff. The staff and student interviews indicate this does help students relate to their school but that more could be done in this area.

Chapter 6

Discussion of findings

The research focused on a number of questions. Why do some students stay on their studies while others leave? Are the main factors internal or external that influence the decision to leave or stay?

The analysis of the data indicates a number of internal themes that influence integration and retention. Access to lecturers and the relationship between the lecturer and the student are key features in student satisfaction, and integration, and this fits well with the social integration element of the model proposed by Tinto (1975). Social integration relates to the number of friends you have and personal contact with academic staff. This is clearly evident from the student interviews as students rely on friends and self help groups to get through College, although the Tinto model stresses socialisation and does not specify self help or study groups. Students identify with their study cohort but within that cohort they are also formed into smaller groups that are created early on in their studies. These groups are made up of College friends who are distinct from the friends they have outside of College and exist for the duration of their studies. The group is informal and not exclusive because many of the interviewees indicated that new members were easily admitted. The data indicates that students seek a relationship with their tutors and that this relationship enables integration into their course and institution. The relationship is important to students because the tutor provides support through delivering topics and pastoral care. The interviews indicate that students need to be satisfied with the relationship or they will become demotivated. Hardwick and Ford (1986) indicate that commitment presupposes that a relationship can be seen as

important when it is assumed that it will prove of value to the individual concerned. Certainly students invest a great deal of time and cost into the relationship they have with the College, its staff and the students in their cohort. So there are costs and benefits associated with maintaining or quitting the relationship.

The interviews indicate that many students persevere, overcome challenges and stay on course. This is interesting because it makes links to Bennett's (2003) multivariate model which draws on relationship management theory and indicates that students who have positive academic experiences build an attachment to their institution despite dissatisfaction elsewhere in their course. Harrison (2006) takes this a stage further to offer an alternative integration and retention model based on persistence rather than on withdrawal. This alternative view has some merit when we consider some of the students indicated that, although they were on the wrong course or dissatisfied, they stayed because they had a strong social network in the College. The group members also encouraged each other to stay on course. This alternative model of student persistence has some validity when we consider the importance of relationships between students, and between staff and students. The stronger the relationships the more commitment students will have to their course.

Students need the link to the tutor and their student group because they spend less time in College due to their need to work part-time and are not involved in extra-curricular social activities. The data indicates that students did not make regular use of the student union, sports facilities, library or IT facilities and preferred to work at home. Essentially students when not in class are at work or home and thus have a need for a stronger relationship with their tutor and College friends. It appears that there is a shift in student

commitment from the College as an institution, to a commitment to their course and peers. This has a number of implications. The College as a provider of student education and development has facilities that are underutilised. The student experience is becoming diluted due to the limited engagement that students have with the College. The student interviews and questionnaire comments indicate the importance of having friends and forming friendships. The reliance on College friends and groups mean that it is more important than before to create situations that enable these groups to be formed. Relationships are key to integration so tutors need to be able to form relationships with the students and this may require the development of their interpersonal skills because the data indicates some staff are more approachable and supportive than others. The support and access expected by students indicates that staff will need more time for students to access them for support.

Tinto (1975) indicates goal commitment is an important element in student integration. It is clear from the student interviews that they had personal and academic goals. Some had goals developed prior to joining College and could see where their College course would take them. This was particularly clear from the accounting students interviewed because they were focused on a career. So no matter the challenges presented to these students they stayed focused on what they wanted to achieve. The Business Studies students interviewed had short term objectives to pass, get a degree and a job. The Business Studies students also had no clear idea of what their career would be and these students tended to struggle with this throughout their course. Certainly the interview and questionnaire data indicates that expectations are shaped by internal and external factors and that students career expectations do change as they progress through their course.

Certainly the student and staff interviews indicate varying levels of institutional commitment by students. The questionnaire indicated 63% of students chose the College as their first choice but that does not imply commitment as 22.6% of students had considered leaving. The interviews indicated that many students found semester 2 of year 2 and semester 1 of year 3 as crisis points and in many cases the students rationalised their reason for staying by recognizing there was not long to go and the amount of effort/work that had already been put in did not merit giving up. Tinto indicates institutional commitment manifests itself in the dispositional, financial and time commitments individuals make in attending an institution. Students indicated in some interviews that the College was their second choice and in all of the interviews the fact the College was local was seen as a financial incentive because it saved them money to travel in. Time commitments to College seemed to only relate to attending classes and small bursts of study in relation to exam revision or coursework. Time commitment was also evident by the fact mentioned earlier that a number of students do not use the College facilities like the library or IT labs and preferred to work at home.

Tinto's model implies that students have major financial commitments toward an institution but this does not appear to be the case from the interviews. Students indicated they were not concerned about student debt because many were in part-time work. The data from the student interviews and the questionnaires indicated students were not concerned about debt and were resigned to the fact they needed work throughout their studies. Certainly students were angry when classes were cancelled at short notice because they had arranged to travel to College for that class and there was a financial penalty to do so in the form of travel costs, childcare costs and part-time work opportunities missed. Disposition toward the institution can be inferred from the

interviewee statements concerning “student friendly” and “family atmosphere” as indicators of commitment but this is not clear in Tinto’s model. Certainly Tinto’s model could be expanded on how it defines institutional commitment. Tinto’s model proposes a longitudinal journey of academic and social integration in which the students modify their goal and institutional commitments (expectations) in light of their experiences and interactions with the academic and social systems of the college. Certainly it should be acknowledged that Tinto recognises the limitations of his model and that it does not readily apply to ‘commuting’ students. The starting point in the Tinto model is the expectations the students bring with them when they join the college, these expectations are shaped by their family background, their pre-college experiences and individual attributes. The interviews indicate that these factors exist but in most cases the interviewed students indicated they had limited expectations on what College would mean to them or what the experience would be like. However the questionnaire results indicate that 48% of the students had a positive impression of the College before they joined which implies some expectations of what the experience would be like. Students who were the first ones in their family to enter into HE had no experience of what it would be like and this influenced their expectations. Some students had parents who had been in HE and they benefited from their parents’ experience, knowledge and values so there is evidence that parental education provides access to cultural capital. The interview results imply Tinto is making general assumptions on students’ expectations, although we could agree once students are in the system their expectations will change. Clift (2003) indicates the need for pre-course initiatives which provide realistic expectations for students and what to expect from their student experience. The interview and questionnaire results indicate the importance of the induction week for student orientation, the chance to form friends and ‘gel’ as a class. Kember (1995)

indicates the need for a degree of fit between students and institutional expectations of each other. The interviews indicate that there may be a lack of fit between the students' expectations and those of the College. Certainly there is no indication that the expectations of the College have been communicated to students. Yorke (1997) and McGiveny (1998, 2003) indicate the need for pre-guidance to reduce integration and retention problems due to incompatibility between students and their course or institution. This is an issue for a number of students interviewed because they did not have any pre-guidance. This is also mirrored in the questionnaire findings when we see students did not value pre-entry guidance. The implications of this are that the College requires to engage more with students prior to joining their programme of study to set expectations and continue to manage students' expectations throughout their time in College. This is an area in which the College should develop policies for future students so that expectations can be set early on for students through pre-entry guidance.

Astin (1999, p.519) makes five propositions concerning student involvement and the analysis of the data support his claims. Astin indicates institutional policy and practice affect how students spend their time and energy. What Astin does not consider is the development of informal policies and practices and how this may impact on students and it is clear from the analysis that this is an issue that causes stress for students and creates situations that lead to students dropping out. Astin (1999, p.523) states 'the theory of involvement explicitly acknowledges that the psychic and physical time and energy of students is finite. Thus, educators are competing with other forces in the student's life for a share of that finite time and energy'. This is a valid view when we consider that many of the interviewees and questionnaire respondents worked up to twenty hours and more a week to earn money and indicated they spent very little time on studying and

this study time was limited to short bursts of revision for exams or coursework. This implies less academic integration by students because the study time is not constant.

The juggling act of College, social life and work is implied in a number of the interview and questionnaire responses and again fits quite well with Astin's proposal that involvement occurs along a continuum and students will have differing degrees of involvement at different times. The analysis of the data supports part of Astin's proposal that student learning and development associated with their educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of their involvement in that programme. The interview and questionnaire results indicated that students prefer an interactive teaching approach to a passive one, the students indicated that they liked variety in teaching approaches and interesting subjects. The quality and quantity of student involvement has a number of implications. Tutors need to be able to engage students and the teaching approach needs to be flexible and one that provides the opportunity for students to interact in the subject delivery. To be able to provide a varied and interactive teaching approach requires staff skills, experience and resources, these might need to be acquired by tutors and resourced by the College.

The discussion on institutional commitment in this chapter indicates that students are changing how they interact with the College and the expectations they have of being on an HE course are also changing. They have created, in effect silos, where they separate out their lives into three distinct areas of College, work and home. The questionnaire data indicates that 80% of students are involved in part-time work. The Business School has concentrated the teaching into two or three full days at College rather than spreading the teaching over a whole week. The result of this is that students now see the

non teaching days as days for part-time work and resist any extra classes even if they are put on formally by the Business School to help them. Gaps in the timetable are frowned upon by students who would rather be taught than have study periods. Student and staff interviews indicate students see gaps in their timetable as an indicator that the course is disorganised. Staff interviews have found staff to be frustrated with students who arrange dental, hospital appointments and driving lessons during teaching time rather than fit them around their non-teaching days. Students are now arranging part-time work around their timetable and will ask tutors for classes to be moved to suit their work. So the emphasis on what is important for students is commitment to part-time work. The implication of this is the College needs to consider how it can deliver its programmes to students who have limited engagement with the College and whose focus is more on getting what they need from the academic side quickly. They have less time for the other elements that make up the holistic student experience of HE such as engagement in sports, social and non-educational activities. Almost all of the College students commute and locality is one of the main reasons why students choose to study there. It is likely that there will be similar patterns of student engagement in HEIs that have predominately local student populations who commute. This also implies that those HEIs will be facing similar student engagement problems and demands from students as those described in this case study.

The staff interviews indicate that first year students are used to being taught to pass exams and given directed learning in school. This approach to teaching is carried over as an expectation by many of the first year students coming from school and it is assumed that it will continue in the College. The influence of the teaching approaches in school and their impact on students' expectations of HE teaching was also seen by

Cooke (2006). Tutors indicated that it was recognised that spoon-feeding was something that happened in the College and that the tutors aspired to making the first year students more self reliant as they progressed through the second and third years of their studies. However it was clear from the staff interviews that many students in all of the year groups only wanted to learn what they needed to know and did not want to seek knowledge for the sake of it. So students were adopting a minimalist approach to their studies, only studying what they needed to know. This minimalist approach has a number of implications. More pressure will be put on tutors by their students to teach only what is needed to pass rather than the full curriculum and this will frustrate tutors. Tutors already feel under pressure because teaching time has been constricted during the semesters and thus have less time to deliver their subjects. Some tutors have put on additional classes (not officially timetabled) to ease their workload and support the students. The restriction on time for teaching means that some tutors will teach to exams and there might also be a need for more lecturing rather than the interactive teaching that motivates and engages students. The staff state there is now an emerging distinction between students who are high achievers and those who are minimal achievers. The minimalist approach to learning also means that students might graduate with a limited knowledge of their subject areas and this might lead to the reputation of the College and its staff being tarnished. The minimalist approach is at odds with the staff values because they see their role as an educator and they want to make a difference. Certainly the staff interviews indicate that a number of employers have found accounting students to be lacking in ability and knowledge. The accounting tutors with links to industry have stated that the employers' views are that the quality of student graduating has got poorer in comparison to previous graduates.

There are a number of external influences on College students and these include their part-time work, their family, their partner, their friends and their secondary school. The influence of school has already been discussed concerning its impact on their expectations of how they will be taught. The school and, in particular, the teaching staff also set expectations in that the students should go into HE and, in some cases they provided advice on careers. As stated earlier part-time work is a major influence on students due to the amount of time dedicated to it and it is the main source of finance for students. Tutors see part-time work as a major distraction for the students attempting to study because so much of students' time and effort is based around it. From the student interviews part-time employment can also lead to offers of full time employment and a number of student leavers took up this opportunity. Students get a range of support depending on their family background. Students who are the first ones in their family to enter HE receive less informed support from their parents because they don't know what it is like to be in HE. On the other hand students who have parents who have been in HE are guided by them to what institution to go to and when they are there the parents may provide hands-on support. So there can be different levels of support ranging from very little parental input to quite intense support. Mature students indicate that they get support from their family and their partner, in many cases their family has to come to terms with the fact they have entered HE and they provide support. In all cases the family provides students with some financial support but the majority of the financial support comes from students' part-time work.

Friends and acquaintances outside of College influence students to enrol in College and add to their expectations of what it will be like because some have experience of attending College or know someone who has. Interviews indicated that friends outside

of College do not provide academic support but do influence the initial choice of where to enrol through word-of-mouth.

Other research questions concerned integration and retention policies and how they were developed and implemented. It is clear that the College has policies on student integration and retention and this has produced a number of formal strategies. The delivery of the formal integration and retention strategies are left to each individual school to implement. The staff interviews with course leaders and senior lecturers who have line management responsibility indicate tutors are assigned tasks to do and given discretion to carry them out but there is no formal evaluation of the delivery of the task by the Business School. Examples of integration strategies would be information sessions, social events, guidance, student induction, interactive teaching and study skill development. Student attendance monitoring would be seen as a retention strategy. Guidance was discussed earlier and, again due to accessibility of the staff, formal guidance does not happen in many cases. Guidance still happens only it is less structured and is provided on demand when students need it rather than at set periods. So a major point is that there needs to be more control and leadership of the formal integration and retention strategies so that resources are not wasted and that the delivery strategies can be improved. Tutors have adopted informal integration and retention strategies as part of their teaching approaches. These include monitoring student attendance and progression, altering their teaching style/approach, building relationships with students, developing teaching materials, extra classes and mock assessment. These informal strategies co-exist with the formal ones and again there is no evaluation, and it would be unlikely there would be because they are not formal strategies. The main point here is that there will be good practice developed by staff and

this is not passed on for others to adopt, so the school is missing an opportunity to improve the student experience, meet their expectations and develop staff. Has the research allowed us to address the question - Can we profile students who would be at risk of leaving their course? From the student interviews and questionnaires it is possible to identify a number of student characteristics that would identify students at risk of not integrating. Table 6.1 provides a summary of possible factors and solutions.

Table 6.1 Students at risk of not integrating

Student characteristic	Explanation	Solution
First year	First time in HE. Tends to be main year that students drop out. Fail to make transition from school to HE. Expectations and objectives unclear.	Dedicated tutor team for year, staff selected on ability to engage with students.
Infill students	Come in from other institutions. May not have the same pre-requisite modules. Level they are at might be below current students. Not able to break into existing peer groups.	Identify differences in modules, qualifications or experience. Use bridging course to bring up to speed or provide extra tuition during term time. Create circumstances for group to mix. Have induction for each new year to mix students.
Loners	Not able to break into existing peer groups.	Staff need to identify and attempt to create circumstances for group to mix.
First time in HE	Student is the first one in their family to enter HE so has no input from family on what to expect or how to cope.	Staff need to monitor progress.
Bare minimum qualifications or non-standard qualifications	Students might not have the ability to cope because they are at a different level from other students.	Stream classes and provide more tutor support and/or timetabled tutorials.
No objectives	Students have no clear reason why they are on the course.	Discuss with students through guidance early in the semester or as part of students' Personal Development Plan during induction.
Late entrant	Perhaps taken course at the last minute, so not aware what they will be studying. Taking course for the wrong reasons. Unable to catch up with lectures. Problem joining existing peer groups.	Provide pre-entry guidance, check reasons for taking course, perhaps enable switch to more appropriate course. Arrange with tutors to provide materials, flag up possible problems, monitor progress. Set up opportunity for student to mix with peers.
Come in from another institution after dropping out	Same issues as infill students. Previous experience may provide doubt about ability.	Same solution as infill students.
Mature students	Long time out of education. Fear of failure. Feel life experience not valued. Previous experience in education. Home commitments. Doubt ability to cope, lack confidence, feel they don't belong.	Provide guidance. Provide bridging or extra tutorial support. Enable peer groups to be set up. Indicate sources of support.

The student interviews and questionnaires indicate students can have difficulty integrating into the College if they have had negative educational experiences either at school or in another FE/HE institution. Similarly students found it difficult to cope if they had no friends at College and some students found it difficult to make friends if they were joining the second or third year of a course or joined late. The research indicates mature students struggle initially and over time recognise they have the skills and ability to do well in College. The research indicates that goals and objectives are important and students struggle if they are not sure why they are studying, certainly this was a problem for a number of students when they could not see where their degree could take them and had no idea what they wanted to do after their studies. Students who were the first in their family to study in HE might also struggle to integrate as they did not know what to expect from their studies or student experience. These students could not rely on advice from their family, so the College needs to be aware of this expectation gap.

In many instances the College will have the information from students' application forms or interview. The challenge is to use that to identify 'at risk' students and support them. Table 6.1 indicates that tutors are the main providers for the solutions to the problems identified. Resources will be needed to dedicate staff to student groups. The analysis of the student and staff data indicate that relationships are important and that some staff are more approachable or skilled than others when it comes to working with students. The College will need to identify which staff are appropriate to fulfil the student support roles.

Can a new model for student integration be developed? Analysis of the research data indicates a number of themes that are inter-related. The two themes are managing relationships and managing expectations, these are key to academic and social integration. Figure 6.1 provides an overview of the influences on student expectations and how these evolve during the course of their studies. The model indicates that

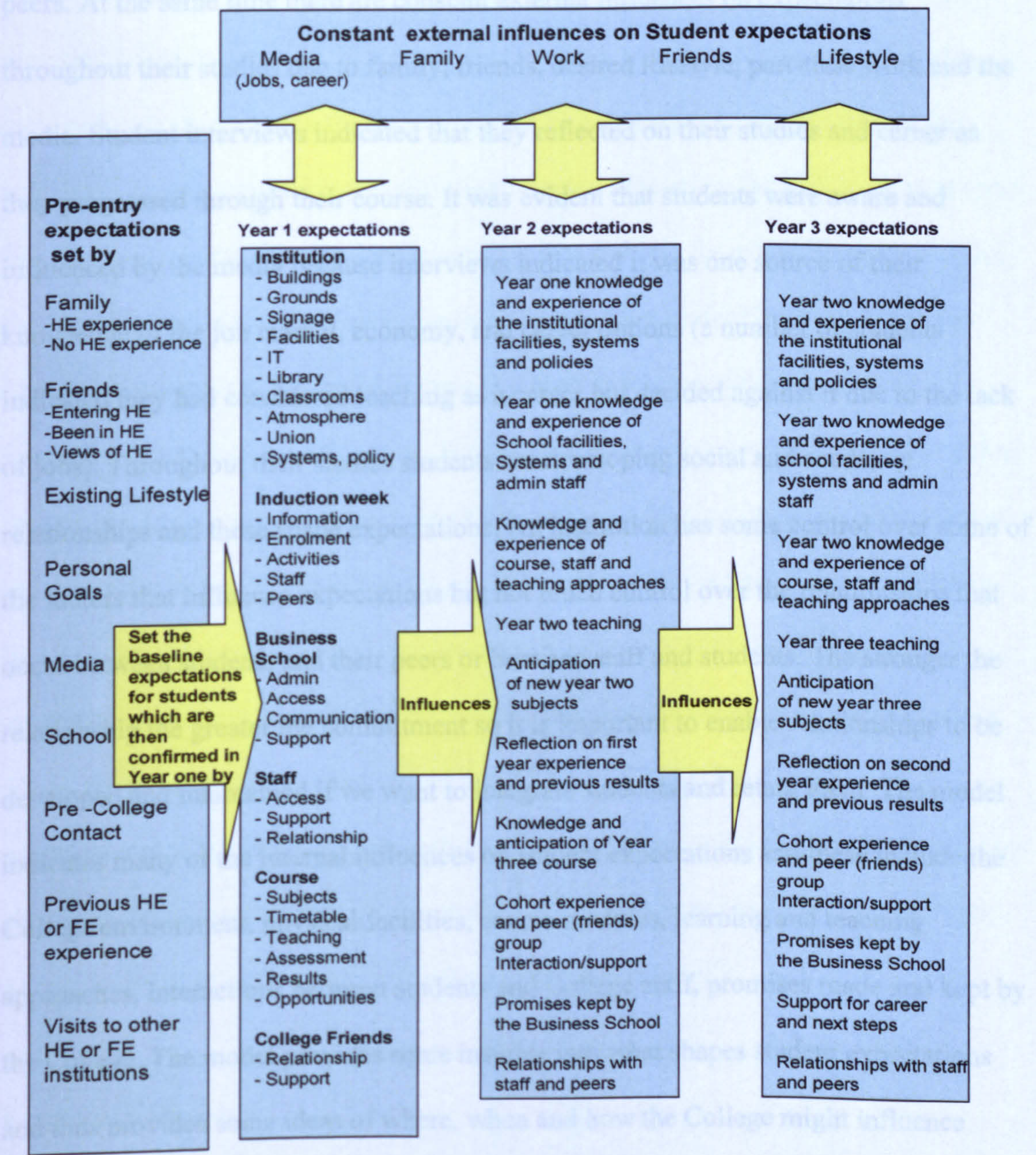


Figure 6.1 Student expectations are shaped and reshaped as they progress through the institution and this influences their commitment to the institution and their student experience. Managing and meeting student expectations should improve student integration.

expectations are initially set at the pre-entry stage and these expectations are reshaped during year 1. Student expectations in years two and three will have expectations shaped by their previous experience as a student in other FE/HE institutions. Expectations are reshaped as students progress through each year and gain more knowledge and experience of their course as well as build stronger relationships with staff and their peers. At the same time there are constant external influences on expectations throughout their studies due to family, friends, desired lifestyle, part-time work and the media. Student interviews indicated that they reflected on their studies and career as they progressed through their course. It was evident that students were aware and influenced by the media because interviews indicated it was one source of their knowledge of the job market, economy, and career options (a number of students indicated they had considered teaching as a career but decided against it due to the lack of jobs). Throughout their studies students are developing social and academic relationships and these shape expectations. An institution has some control over some of the factors that influence expectations but not much control over the relationships that occur between students and their peers or between staff and students. The stronger the relationship the greater the commitment so it is important to enable relationships to be developed and maintained if we want to integrate students and retain them. The model indicates many of the internal influences on student expectations and these include the College environment, physical facilities, course modules, learning and teaching approaches, interactions between students and College staff, promises made and kept by the College. The model provides some insights into what shapes student expectations and thus provides some ideas of where, when and how the College might influence student expectations and the student experience leading to better student integration.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and recommendations

Statement of originality

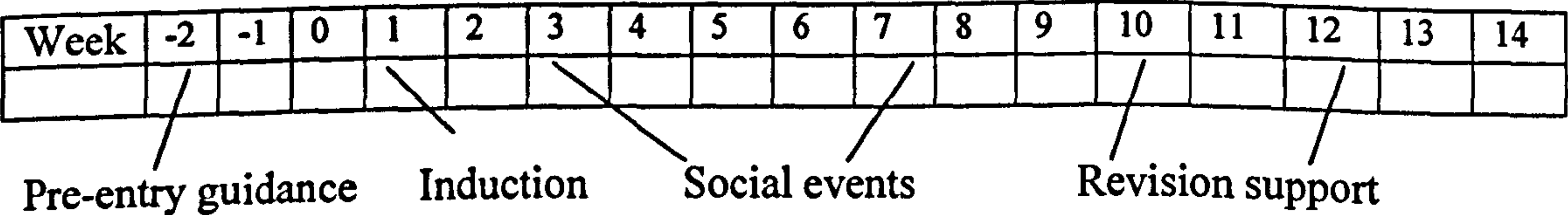
This research project investigates student integration in a new HEI. The research undertaken is original in that it investigates student integration in a case study set in a new HEI based in Scotland. The researcher has been unable to locate any similarly localised case study within the literature. The research investigates the factors that influence student integration and also the strategies adopted by the HEI to integrate and as a result retain students. Student integration is a problem for every HEI and much of the literature and theory has been generated by writers outside of the UK. There has been some research in England but there is a need to increase research on student integration in Scotland. The research is more important when we consider the changing face of the student population and the challenges faced by students who need to spend as much time in part-time work as they do in the HEI. The research is also original in that it investigates and explores the views and approaches of the academic staff involved in satisfying students' expectations. The research provides an analysis of the life of present day students and should lead to a better understanding of the student experience and the changing expectations of the student population. This understanding should lead to changes in integration strategies and policy reviews/developments that may aid student integration and retention in the case study HEI.

Recommendations

Student induction is a key point in the integration of students into the institution. The student interviews and questionnaire results indicate students use this period to form

self help groups and make friends. The College should review the induction programme and consider how they can facilitate the creation of these self help groups and the forming of relationships between staff and students, students and their peers. The College has a number of students infilling into year 2 and year 3 of the academic programmes, as such there should be an induction for these students and again the opportunity for students to create or join existing support groups. Induction has been seen as an event that only happens in the first week. There is a need to look at extending the induction throughout the first semester to continue to reinforce student integration. This could take the form of social events as well as information sessions, (Cook *et al.*, 2006a, 2006c). Student integration might also come through improved communication with students. Building relationships with students is possible using mobile phone technology, (Harley *et al.*, 2006). Students have expressed dissatisfaction when classes are cancelled or if they are unaware of events like assessment submission dates. Some institutions are now texting students because students don't access their College email but mobiles are with them constantly. This would lead to better communications between the College and students. Communication is a main component of relationship building so it is important that it is effective and managed well. An approach to managing the integration strategies and the extended induction policies is to use a timeline model (figure 7.1) to plan events before the students join and as they progress through their course.

Figure 7.1 Timeline model for student progression and link to strategies



Student interviews indicated crisis points in the first 6 weeks of joining the College, the end of semester 1, and the middle of semesters 2 and 3. Staff should be aware that students face these challenges and the Business School should identify opportunities to discuss progress with students with a view to motivating them and offering support where needed during their academic year and in anticipation of the new academic year so that expectations are managed. At present guidance is fulfilling this role but in an ad hoc way. Students' expectations are changing and due to the amount of time spent in part-time working there is very little time spent in the College when the students do not have classes. The College needs to consider strategies for socially integrating all students. Managing the expectations of students is key to integration and retention so the College needs to identify these expectations and shape them. Students are upset when the course they have joined does not meet expectations. The College needs to communicate better with prospective students and set expectations early on. The materials used to inform students about courses need to be available and if possible discussed with students at the pre-entry stage. This could be done face-to-face or by email/telephone. This might reduce the number of early leavers.

Student interviews and questionnaire results indicate that some lecturing staff are seen as more approachable than others. This is only natural and it is unlikely every member of staff would be approachable. The College should consider the staff attributes for nurturing year one students and have dedicated year one staff to help students. Not every member of staff has the personal skills to provide pastoral care so perhaps allocating those members of staff who are good at forming relationships and supporting students will help students to integrate into the College. High levels of pastoral care are evident in the student and staff interviews and the College should encourage staff to

engage in this. Building relationships is key to integrating and retaining students because they welcome the interest shown in them. Students spend less time in College than ever before and more time is spent in part-time work so the relationships they have with staff are key in providing support. Staff should be encouraged to develop relationships with students. Certainly some members of staff interviewed share anecdotes or share personal experiences with their students as part of their teaching. Story telling results in relationship building, the partial stripping away of the professional barrier by the lecturer enables the students to feel they can trust them and also share confidences. Story telling is also used as a mechanism for illustrating points in lectures and humanising the teaching.

The student and staff interviews indicate the important roles carried out by lecturers. These roles fit within the ten managerial roles put forward by Mintzberg (1990). To fulfil these roles staff need to develop a number of interpersonal, informational and decisional skills. The College should provide staff development so that these skills can be honed. These roles are important so that staff can communicate, build relationships and be flexible in their teaching approaches.

Guidance needs to be reviewed to consider how it might be valued more by students. Currently guidance is ad hoc. The purpose of guidance needs to be explained to staff and students. Guidance is seen by students as valid only if they have a problem. The staff have an open door policy and this means that formal guidance is undermined because students have access to staff. This results in students seeing no need to take part in guidance. The College has to review guidance and decide if it wishes to continue providing guidance in its current format.

The formal integration and retention strategies need to be evaluated, to see if they are valid and can be improved on. There needs to be more coordination of integration and retention strategies. The informal strategies need to be investigated to see if they can be formalised and adopted. Certain members of staff are engaged in good practice and this should be investigated to see how it could be applied elsewhere. Students value integrative teaching practices and variety in teaching methods. The College should consider how staff can be provided with the resources and skills to do this. Cohorts of students who need more support should be given more help. At risk students should be identified and allocated to staff so that their progress can be monitored and supported. There is a need to allow staff the flexibility to add extra classes to reduce the stress placed on students so that subjects can be covered in the one semester. The flexibility should provide staff with the opportunity to use more mock tests and revision sessions. The additional duties carried out by staff should be recognised on their timetable so they are not being penalised for being conscientious. Student timetables should be reviewed to reduce long gaps between classes. The Business School needs to review timetabling and fill gaps with meaningful academic activities. Currently there are no exit interviews or follow up calls for students who leave. There is a need for the College to gather more accurate data on the reasons why students leave.

It is evident that management have to take a greater role in the integration and retention of students. There is a need to revisit existing policies and evaluate their effectiveness. New policies need to be created to cater for the demands placed on the College from students who are not engaging. The research indicates that students are organising their College studies around their lives rather than their lives around their studies. There is less commitment to the College and more commitment to part-time work and their

lifestyle outside of College. There is less academic and social integration, students rely more on the relationships formed with staff and their peers than the one they have with the College. HE institutions that operate in similar environments where students are local and heavily involved in part-time work will face similar issues to those faced by the case study institution.

Areas for further research

This research project has identified a number of areas that are worth investigating further. The current research has identified the role of story telling in teaching and how this enables relationship building between staff and students. There is a need to explore this aspect of teaching more to see how this element of teaching leads to student integration and relationship building. The research has identified a new student profile where the student is inclined to disengage from the College and it is worth investigating the development of policies and teaching practices that would integrate this new evolution in student participation. The research has indicated the role of the tutor in integrating and retaining students. There is a need to examine the interpersonal skills required by tutors to engage and motivate students. This also includes the skills involved in relationship building. It is clear that relationships are important for students and it is worth investigating the network of relationships that support students to cope in HE. One last area for investigation concerns the translation of policy into strategy and operational plans. It is clear from the research for this thesis that implementing and evaluating integration and retention strategies are problematic for line managers in HE.

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Appendix 1: Interview Information sheet

Information Sheet for Potential Participants

My name is Tom Keegan and I work as a lecturer in the Business School at As part of my doctorate, I am undertaking research into student retention. The title of the research project is:

“An evaluation of student retention in a new HEI”

This study will explore the retention strategies adopted by the College and how students view these strategies. The findings from the study will be valuable because they will evaluate the effectiveness of the retention strategies and this will lead to improvements in retention strategies and a better learning environment and experience for future students.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be interviewed by the researcher. You will be expected to discuss and reflect on your student experience. The interview will be recorded and will last for 45 minutes. You are free to withdraw from the study at any stage, you would not have to give a reason, and it will not in any way affect your progression on the course. The project will also mean that I will have to listen to and transcribe your audio recording. All data will be anonymised, although you may be identifiable from tape recordings of your voice. Your name will be replaced with a participant number or pseudonym, and it will not be possible for you to be identified in any recording of the data gathered. Any data collected will be kept in a secure place to which only the researcher has access. These will be kept until the end of the research study and then destroyed.

The results may be published in a journal or presented at a conference and if you wish, you will be provided with a copy at the end of the study.

If you would like to contact an independent person, who knows about this project but is not involved in it, you are welcome to contact Mr..... His contact details are given below. If you have read and understood this information sheet, any questions you had have been answered, and you would like to be a participant in the study, please now see the consent form.

Contact details of the researcher:

Name of researcher: Tom Keegan
Address: School of Business, Thistle College
Email / Telephone:

Contact details of the independent adviser:

Name of Adviser: Mr
Address: School of Business, Thistle College
Email / Telephone:

Appendix 2: CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: An evaluation of student retention in a new HEI

Name of Researcher: Tom Keegan, School of Business.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated
for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw
at any time without giving any reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

I agree to the interview being tape recorded.

Name of interviewee

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

1 for interviewee; 1 for researcher

Appendix 3: Original semi-structured questions

1. What course are you on?
2. Why are you doing the course?
3. What do you like about the course?
4. What do you not like about your course?
5. The college uses a number of different strategies to keep students on their course can you tell me any strategies you are aware of?
6. Have you ever considered leaving your course?
7. What made you stay?
8. Did you take part in a student induction week?
9. Did you find the student induction week useful?
10. Have you taken part in any study skills classes?
11. Have you had any other support from the college or staff?
12. Have you had guidance?
13. What do you think of the college facilities?
14. Why did you choose this college for your studies?
15. Did you have an interview before you signed up for your course?
16. What information did you get at the interview?
17. What did you expect the college to be like?
18. What made you see the college in this way?
19. What do you think of the college facilities?
20. What challenges have you had to overcome this term?
21. How did you manage to overcome these challenges?
22. Do you feel the college is a very student friendly place?
23. Do you have lots of friends at college?
24. Do you and your friends work together to discuss the course and the assessments?
25. Do you help each other through the course?

Appendix 4: Student Questionnaire

School of Business Student Survey

The School of Business is conducting research in order to understand the reasons why some students drop out and others progress through their course. The research should help to ensure the School of Business improve on the service it provides students. As some of the questions ask about personal details, all of the information will be treated in the strictest confidence. It will not be possible to identify any individual from the data and you do not have to complete this questionnaire if you do not wish to.

Course Details

- 1. Title of Course and year (e.g. BA Business year 2)_____
- 2. Total number of hours in class per week _____

Reasons for choosing this course

3. How did you find out about the course? Please tick the main source of information from the list.

Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	College Literature	<input type="checkbox"/>
School Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	Open Day	<input type="checkbox"/>
Careers Officer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal visit on another occasion	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employer	<input type="checkbox"/>	Advert	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other, please state. _____

4. Which of the following best describes your reason for taking your current course?

Progress to further qualifications	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gain a job at the end of the course	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pursue a personal interest	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Keep parents/guardian happy☐
- Follow a career☐
- Friends were doing the course☐
- Other *(please specify)*

5. Is the course you are following your first choice?

Yes☐

No☐

6. If no, please specify the course you wanted to do.

7. What is the name of your last educational establishment?

8. Why did you decide to attend this College? Please tick one reason only.

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Good institution reputation | <input type="checkbox"/> | Wanted to attend with friends | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Good course reputation | <input type="checkbox"/> | Little chance of finding a job | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Recommended by friends | <input type="checkbox"/> | Careers advice | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Recommended by family | <input type="checkbox"/> | Recommended by School | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Near home | <input type="checkbox"/> | Easy to get to by public transport | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other *(please specify)*

9. When you were at secondary school what kind of impression did you have about this College?

Positive impression☐

Negative impression☐

No impression☐

10. Did your teachers support your decision to come to this College?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable because I ☐
left school a long time ago

11. To what extent did your family support your decision to come to this College?

Very strong support ☐
Some support ☐
Didn't mind ☐
Not interested ☐
Against you coming ☐

12. Did any of your friends influence your decision to come to this College?

Yes ☐ No ☐

13. Did any of your friends come to this College at the same time as you?

Yes ☐ No ☐

14. Was your experience of secondary school life:

Enjoyable ☐ Mostly enjoyable ☐ No feeling about it ☐
Slightly unpleasant ☐ Mainly unpleasant ☐

15. If it was slightly/mainly unpleasant, please explain why.

16. Have you ever left a previous course without finishing the qualification?

Yes ☐ No ☐

17. What was your main reason for leaving?

18. Have you ever considered leaving your current course?

Yes ☐

No ☐

19. If your answer was 'yes' please indicate why you considered leaving.

20. If your answer is 'yes' please indicate what made you stay.

Student experience

21. What have been the positive things you have experienced at this College?

22. What have been the negative things you have experienced at this College?

23. Do you have friends at this College?

Yes ☐

No ☐

24. If yes, when did you form these friendships?

25. Where did you form these friendships? For example during the induction week or in class.

26. How important are these friends to your studies?

27. Are your College friends different from the ones you have at home?

Yes ☐ No ☐

28. If yes, in what way are they different?

29. This College uses a number of retention strategies, tick the ones you have experienced.

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Information session | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Pre-entry guidance | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Entry tests | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Induction | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Bridging courses | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Guidance | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Attendance monitoring | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Self-help or study groups | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Peer support | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Adjustments to teaching methods or approaches | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Extra teaching or extra classes | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feedback on progress | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mock assessments | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Academic support – personal tutoring | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Student support services | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Counselling | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Providing support for developing your study skills | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Social events | <input type="checkbox"/> |

30. In your experience which have been the most useful retention strategies? Please tick.

- Information session ☐
- Pre-entry guidance ☐
- Entry tests ☐
- Induction ☐
- Bridging courses ☐
- Guidance ☐
- Attendance monitoring ☐
- Self-help or study groups ☐
- Peer support ☐
- Adjustments to teaching methods or approaches ☐
- Extra teaching or extra classes ☐
- Feedback on progress ☐
- Mock assessments ☐
- Academic support – personal tutoring ☐
- Student support services ☐
- Counselling ☐
- Providing support for developing your study skills ☐
- Social events ☐

31. How do you see your relationship with this College? (Do you identify and want to be associated with this College and its objectives, purpose)

- Positive ☐ Negative ☐ No relationship ☐
- Don't know ☐

32. Is the College 'student-friendly'?

- Yes ☐ No ☐

33. If your answer is no, please explain. _____

34. What could this College do to make it more 'student-friendly'?

35. How generally do you see your relationship with this College's staff? (Are they friendly, interested and supportive?)

Positive ☐ **Negative** ☐ **No relationship** ☐

36. What motivates you when you are at this College?

37. What de-motivates you when you are at this College?

**38. On a scale of 1-10, how likely is it that you will complete your College course?
Please tick one box below.**

Very unlikely to complete

Highly likely to complete

[illegible]

Personal and Family Background

39. How old are you? 16-19 ☐ 20-25 ☐ 26-30 ☐

31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐ 60+ ☐

40. Gender: **Female** ☐ **Male** ☐ (please tick)

41. Ethnicity: please tick the appropriate box.

Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other-Asian	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black African	<input type="checkbox"/>	Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Black Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Black Others	<input type="checkbox"/>	White	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Other (please specify) _____

42. Which of the following best describes your situation? Please tick one box only.

Living with both parents/guardians	<input type="checkbox"/>
Living with one parent / guardian	<input type="checkbox"/>
Single, living alone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Married	<input type="checkbox"/>
In a relationship with dependent children	<input type="checkbox"/>
Separated, living alone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/>
Widowed	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent in a one parent family	<input type="checkbox"/>
Living with partner	<input type="checkbox"/>
Living with grandparents	<input type="checkbox"/>
Living with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify) _____

43. Who is the main breadwinner in your household?

Yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>	Father	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>
Husband/male partner	<input type="checkbox"/>			Wife/female partner	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify) _____

44. On average how much time per day do you devote to looking after someone in your household (e.g. sisters, brothers, your own children, sick or elderly relatives, etc)

No time	<input type="checkbox"/>	1-2 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	3-4 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>	5-6 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>
More than 6 hours	<input type="checkbox"/>						

45. Does this reduce the time you can spend in College?

Yes ☐ No ☐

46. If you are over 18 and have a partner, please describe his/her most recent job or provide their job title.

47. Is your partner currently employed? Yes ☐ No ☐
Not applicable ☐

48. Which of the following best describes your parent's or guardian's situation?

	Father/male guardian	Mother/female guardian
Single	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Married	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Separated	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Divorced	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Widowed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
One parent family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Living with partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Deceased	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify) _____

49. Is your father/guardian currently:

Employed ☐ Unemployed ☐ Retired ☐ Deceased ☐

50. What is/was your father's/guardian's current/ most recent job? _____

51. Is your mother/guardian currently:

Employed ☐ Unemployed ☐ Retired ☐ Deceased ☐

52. What is/was your mother's/guardian's current/most recent job?_____

53. At what age did your father/male guardian and mother/female guardian leave full-time education?

Father/Male Guardian		Mother/Female Guardian	
15	<input type="checkbox"/>	15	<input type="checkbox"/>
16	<input type="checkbox"/>	16	<input type="checkbox"/>
17	<input type="checkbox"/>	17	<input type="checkbox"/>
18	<input type="checkbox"/>	18	<input type="checkbox"/>
19	<input type="checkbox"/>	19	<input type="checkbox"/>
20	<input type="checkbox"/>	20	<input type="checkbox"/>
21	<input type="checkbox"/>	21	<input type="checkbox"/>
22+	<input type="checkbox"/>	22+	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do not know	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do not know	<input type="checkbox"/>

54. If possible please indicate the highest level of qualification achieved by your parents/guardians.

	Father/Male Guardian	Mother/Female Guardian
None	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
O'Levels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Highers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Degree	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Professional Qualification	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do not know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

55. How many other members of your immediate family have been in full-time education beyond the age of 18?

56. How often did your parents/guardians go to parents' evenings at school?

Most ☐ Some ☐ Very few ☐ None ☐

57. How often did your parents/guardians ask you about your progress at school?

Most days ☐ At least once a week ☐ At least once a month ☐

Rarely ☐ Never ☐

58. What support do your parents/guardians offer you while you are at College?

59. How often do your parents/guardians ask you about your progress at College?

- N/A☐Most days☐At least once a week☐
- At least once a month☐Rarely☐Never☐

60. How often does your partner ask you about your progress at College?

- Not relevant☐Most days☐At least once a week☐
- At least once a month☐Rarely☐Never☐

Housing Situation

61. In your present home do you or your parents/guardians

- Own/buying the property☐
- Renting from the Council☐
- Renting from a private landlord☐
- Renting from a housing association☐

Other (*please specify*) _____

61. How long have you lived at your present address?

- Less than one month☐2-6 months☐7-11 months☐
- 1-3 years☐over 3 years☐

63. What is your post code? _____

Financial position

64. Are you offered financial support from any of the following sources? Tick the relevant boxes.

Student Services	<input type="checkbox"/>	Parents/Guardians	<input type="checkbox"/>	Work	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	Student loans	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bank	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (*please specify*) _____

65. Are you concerned about student debt?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
-----	--------------------------	----	--------------------------

66. If yes, is student debt impacting on your ability to complete your course?

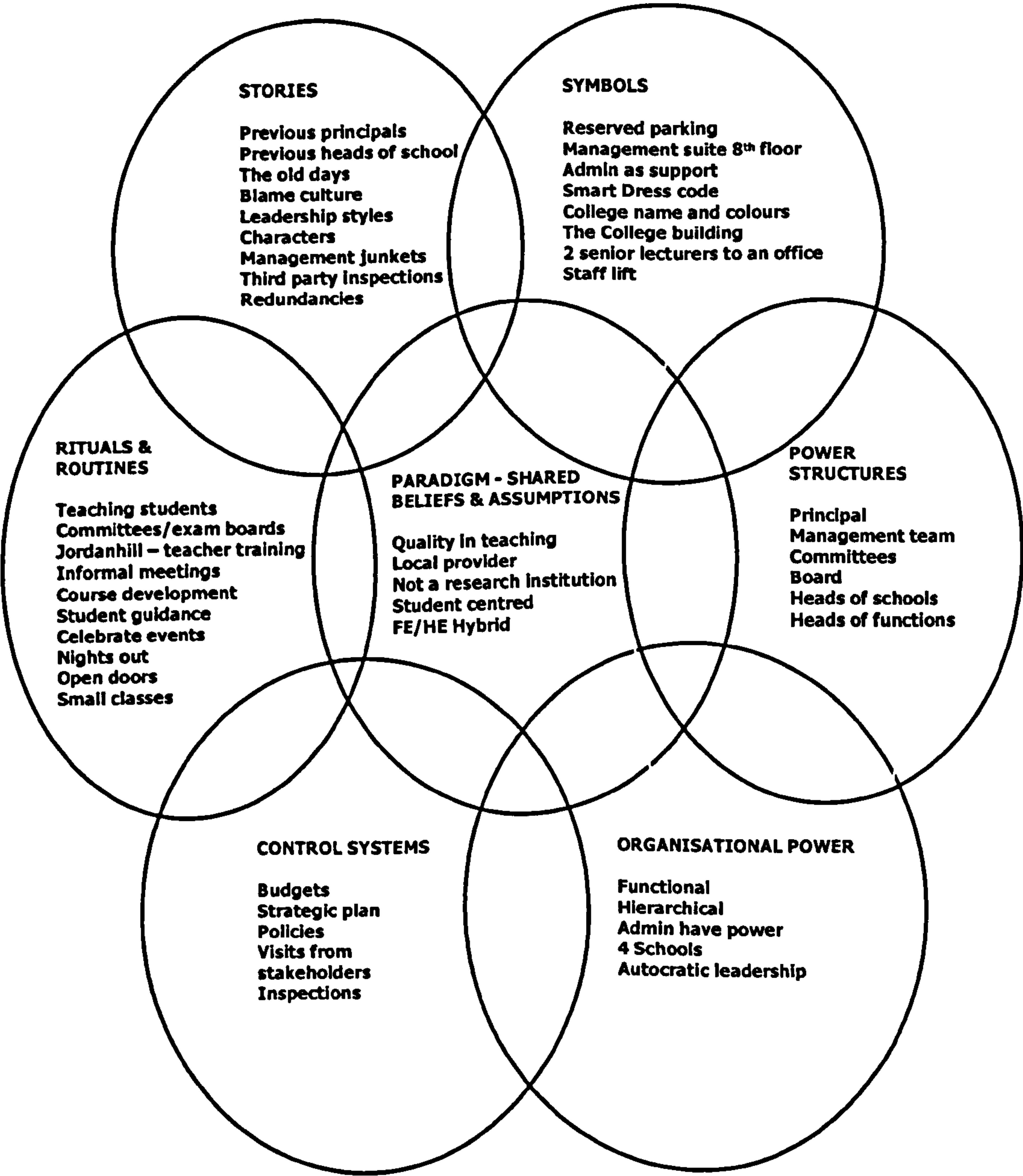
67. Do you have any paid work? Yes ☐ No ☐

68. If yes, how many hours do you work per week? _____

69. Is there any information about why you are studying at this College or any issues raised by this questionnaire you would like to comment on?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Appendix 5: The Cultural Web of Thistle College 2007



Appendix 6: Student interview transcript

Interview with Business School Student 21st February 2007
(Interviewer questions in bold)

Thanks for coming I will ask one question to start of then ask the rest

What course are you on?

CertHE Accounting

CertHE Accounting Ok , Why are you doing the course?

Cause it is something I always wanted to do.

Doing accounts?

Uh Huh

Is that from the very beginning from when you where in school?

I did do it in school so I thought I would just carry it on.

Ok, so what do you like about the course?

I think its interesting, you don't just do the same thing, you do a number of different classes, to help you.

What, a number of different accounting classes?

Uh Huh you do like management and organizational behaviour, and external environment of a business and stuff.

So does that mean its interesting is that what you are saying?

Cause your not just doing the same thing.

Ok so what do you not like about your course?

Some of the ways the lecturers teach us like.

You don't need to name names you can just talk in general

I don't like when we just stand and talk through the power point for about 3 hours. I don't like that I prefer to do like group work or like activities and different things instead of just sitting listening for hour after hour.

Right so you prefer more practical work is that what you are saying?

Uh Huh

The college uses a number of different strategies to keep students on their course can you tell me any strategies you are aware of?

What do you mean?

Retention strategy we would talk about guidance for example or induction. So can you remember any things like that that's happened to keep you on your course?

I don't really know you mean like but we are getting letters home like traffic lights.

Traffic light system?

Green if its good, amber if its aw right and the if you get a red letter you have to go in for a meeting or something like that I don't know.

Right, and you haven't had anything like that yet?

No

Have you had a green one, have you had them?

I have had a yellow one.

You had a yellow letter right?

That was before Christmas, we're getting one sent out again.

Ok, so the college is checking attendance then, but other strategies might be to be with help with teaching or learning?

Revision classes, we've got revision classes on Friday morning. Last semester it was for financial and this semester it is for management and we do mock exams and stuff.

Right we will maybe look at these as we go along. Maybe you'll remember things. Have you ever considered leaving your course?

No

What made you stay?

Cause I enjoy it

You enjoy the course, you enjoy the subject?

Uh Huh

Did you take part in a student induction week?

Yeah

That's part of the process of helping you stay on, isn't it? Did you find the student induction week useful?

In some ways, some, it was a bit boring, cause a lot of the stuff I already knew like.

Like what?

When they showed us how to do IT and stuff like that cause I already knew it from school. So it got a bit boring I suppose if you didn't know the stuff it would be useful.

Right anything that was useful then?

How to use the library cause we never had a clue, we never got that.

Right anything else you can think of?

Our way about, it showed you where to hand in your assessments and stuff on the 7th floor. So that was quite helpful and it let you meet a number of lecturers, different lecturers.

Ok, have you taken part in any study skills classes?

Don't think so.

Don't think so? They were set up on objective setting, or time management or how to read or how to write or how to make notes. You haven't covered that? Have you had any other support from the college or staff?

No

You have when you think about it.

I don't know what you mean.

Support would be tutorial support, or help with exams or revision.

Uh Huh

Ok, have you had guidance?

Yeah I've had a few guidance meetings as well just to see how I was getting on and how I was coping with the course.

Right, have they been useful?

Uh Huh

In what way were they useful then?

If I was, if you were finding something difficult you could say it in front of the lecturer without anybody else hearing and stuff like that.

Ok right, what do you think of the college facilities?

I think the student facilities are good. I don't think the ones over in the other building I don't think they are that well advertised.

Which building is that then?

The one where you go for your student loan and stuff.

Right the student support services in the George building. Right what about other facilities in the college?

Like the student union?

The student union is it quite good?

Uh huh but it's not really that big right enough.

What about the college itself, like the teaching rooms etc these are facilities too?

They're fine.

So why did you choose this college for your studies?

Cause I heard it was actually one of the better ones and it has a better name than the ones say in the town like the Met and stuff like that. My mum says it's better.

Right

Plus you could do your degree here as well.

So are you actually based in this area?

I live in Duddingston so it's not far away.

Right, was that part of your decision as well because Duddingston is close?

Because I moved, I can get the bus straight here in the morning.

Did you have an interview before you signed up for your course?

I came to an open night and I spoke to a woman there, I took along a certificate with my grades and stuff. And I spoke to her there and that was all.

Ok, what kind of information did you get at the interview?

What the course was about, how long it lasted for, I got information about student funding and stuff as well.

What did you expect the college to be like?

I expected it to be a lot bigger actually cause I was used to it at school I was quite scared to come but then when I came everyone seemed quite helpful.

Did you have an image of what it would be like from your experience outside, what you had read?

I just, I never expected everybody, I think I just expected it to be like school but it wasn't. Everybody talks to everybody, they respect people for who they are. They're not like, I don't know how to describe it

They're approachable is that what you are saying?

Uh Huh

Right, I don't want to put words in your mouth. What made you see the college in this way, the fact you saw it big etc?

Cause I've never experienced it

What challenges have you had to overcome this year?

Speaking out in front of everybody, doing presentations, working on the board in front of everybody. That's it.

Ok. How did you manage to overcome these challenges?

I don't know I just, I feel as if our class is quite close and I've got to know everybody and I don't feel embarrassed or anything in front of them anymore because we are bonding a lot. In some classes we're doing a lot of group work where we have to bond wae each other and everyone gets on well.

Ok, do you feel the college is a very student friendly place?

Uh Huh. I never actually expected the lecturers to be actually as friendly as what as they are.

What is that based on then? You didn't expect them to be friendly – why was that?

I don't know, cause everyone says aye at school your spoon-fed and when you go to college it's your responsibility. Peoples experience just told me that lectures could be quite strict.

Is it strict at school then, is it hard to approach teachers?

Uh Huh, I would find it much harder to talk to teachers at school than what I would if I had a problem I would go and seen ma lecturer.

Right Ok. Do you have lots of friends in college?

Uh Huh

Do you and your friends work together to discuss the course and the assessments?

Uh, huh.

Do you help each other through the course?

Uh huh. We do, a lot of the time at lunch time we just go up to a lab the whole class and we just sit if we've got work to do we'll help each other out and if we don't understand we'll help each other as well.

Ok, do you work outside of college?

What?

Part -time job?

Yeah, Uh Huh.

How does that effect your college work?

Sometimes I'm really tired.

So how many hours a week do you think you work?

About 20.

20 hours contact time with your work, is that shift work?

Ah, ha, I'm only contracted for 5 but I get a Tuesday off in here so I work, do a delivery then I work Saturday and Sunday.

Right, so your working weekends and your working 3 days a week then?

Uh huh.

How about your family, how much support do they provide?

A lot of support.

How does that come about, how does it appear, that support?

But if I'm stuck with something I'll go and ask my mum or dad if they can help me and they support me financially as well if I've not got enough money to come to college they'll give me money but I do get a bursary but.

Have you actually used the student services much at all at the college?

No not really. I've used them for my travelling expenses and stuff like that and they were helpful but apart fae that I've no really used them.

One of your main challenges is finance? Anything else that is a challenge to try and keep on the course?

The coursework.

Coursework, how is that a challenge then?

I don't know, before Christmas there we had 2 pieces of coursework to hand in and I find it quite hard tae manage my time but that's what we are doing in Learning Career Development, learning how to manage our time.

Is that time management hindered by the work you do outside the college as well so it has a knock on effect?

Uh Huh, but I need to work because I don't have enough money, I need to work.

I think that is a normal challenge for most students now.

That's us come to the end of the interview. Anything else you think the college could do to help you keep on course or to help you to study?

No, one thing I don't think is fair I'm not saying any names but a few people in my class never attend and they get the full bursary and the near enough the full loan and they're off more times than they are in. I do get a bursary and loan but these people in the class who attend nearly every day and they don't get a bursary or a loan and I don't find that fair. I think the bursary should be taken off the students that don't attend regularly.

Right, again the issue is do they actually get through the courses?

Who, the people that's off?

It's unlikely, I think...

They're in once a week if they're lucky.

**So it's unfair because they are getting the same as you but not putting the work in?
Is that how you see it?**

And there's people who's not getting anything and they're coming everyday.

So that's a general unfairness about the system?

Uh Huh.

Ok, I can see your point on that. Ok, thanks very much now, I'm glad you came.

Appendix 7a: Memos –Friends

(Note memos by their nature are an attempt to organise/capture thoughts, even if the grammar is poor)

Memo – Friends

The importance of having college friends

Making friends early in College is important. Making friends happens during the induction week and happens quickly. Students are thrown together during the induction week and they 'gel', the shared excitement of starting the course and the groups tasks provide them with common ground, common experiences. Many students are scared and afraid when they start and the chance to make friends alleviates their fear. You feel safe with friends. The course is less daunting if you have friends than if you are on your own - alone. Each of the students interviewed indicate the importance of having College friends or pals.

Friends keep you on track. Friends encourage you to stay when you are thinking of leaving the course. Friends share everything, they ease the workload. You can trust friends, they are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Friends help each other cope, they are there for you. Friends have the same shared experiences and make College fun. Friends discuss the course and grump about the bad points. The support provided by friends is preferable to the formal support services like guidance or student welfare. Friends cover for you if you are of ill. Friends get you notes and tell you what is happening in college. Friends work together to study for exams and coursework. Some friends are closer than others. Friends respect each other and understand each other.

Having friends is like a safety net that enables you to survive college. Having friends enable students to integrate into their study programme, it stops them 'falling out of the course', Business student interviewee (13/03/07). The student interviewed on the 13/03/07 managed to survive two years on their HND programme through the support of friends they had made. However, when they joined the degree programme late they missed the induction week so knew no one and felt 'awkward' and alone. So perhaps it is hard to break into established friendship groups if you are a late comer. The lack of friends and the support network contributed to their decision to drop out. Encouraging and supporting peer group formation might be a possible retention and integration strategy.

20/05/2009

Appendix 7a: Memos – Expectations

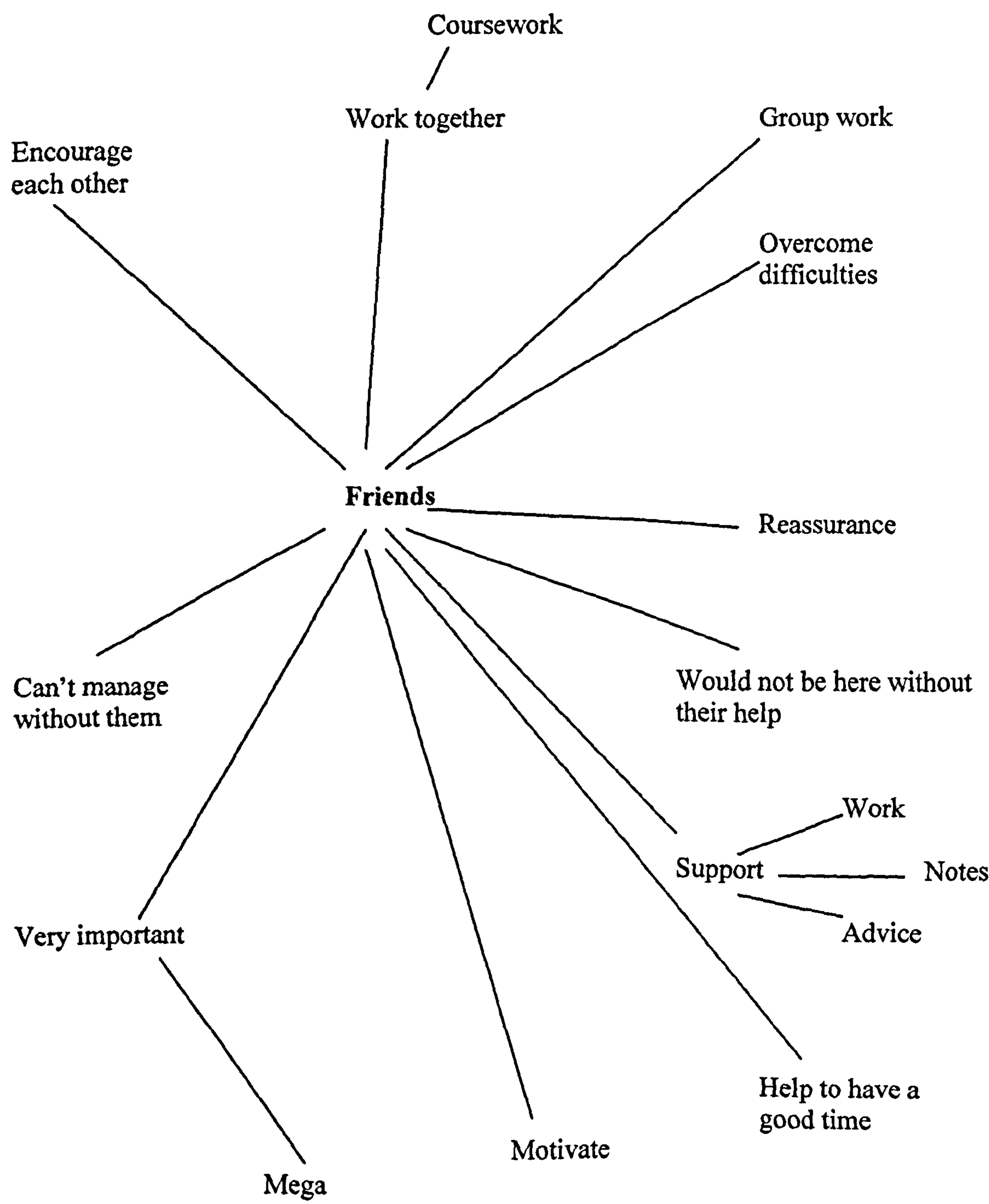
Memo - Expectations

First year students have no idea what Thistle College would be to be like, they knew it would be different. Comparisons are made with school because it is where they have come from recently. Students do not know much about the College apart from its location. Students are not aware of the College size, facilities or the processes – it is a complete unknown. Business student interviewee (03/03/07) based their expectations on film stereotypes of students and assumed the College would fit within that construct. Some students have been to a FE college and they express the difference between Thistle and FE as levels, meaning that Thistle provides degree qualifications and is thus at a higher level than FE. Expectations are set by students' friends at school for example Business student interviewee (13/03/07) heard people talking about it. Expectations are also set by parents for example Business School interviewee (21/02/07) states 'My mum says it is better'. Parents who have experience of HE might shape their son or daughter's expectations, this would include choice of institution, qualification to study and what to expect from student life. Some students did not have an interview so this would not shape their expectations. It comes as a revelation to students that they can approach and talk to College staff. A revelation they are seen as equals. Students are surprised they can discuss problems with lecturers when they feel they could not do this with their school teachers. Another revelation is the friendliness of the College, the family atmosphere. It could be implied the College prospectus would provide some input into the students' expectations but this is not mentioned by students.

Expectations also relate the course and the subjects being studied. Students need to be interested in the subjects and seek variety in how the subjects are taught. There is an expectation the course will interest them and be worthwhile. In some cases the students know what to expect because the course they are studying is a second choice and they modify their expectations. Expectations are also created during the induction week and in subsequent contacts with academic and administrative staff. In a sense students' expectations are changing constantly as they progress through the College. It is only in the first few weeks the students realise their expectations are being met or not. It is at that point they may decide to leave. Expectations are shaped and reshaped as students' progress through their studies. The expectations are shaped by internal factors and external factors.

2/06/2008

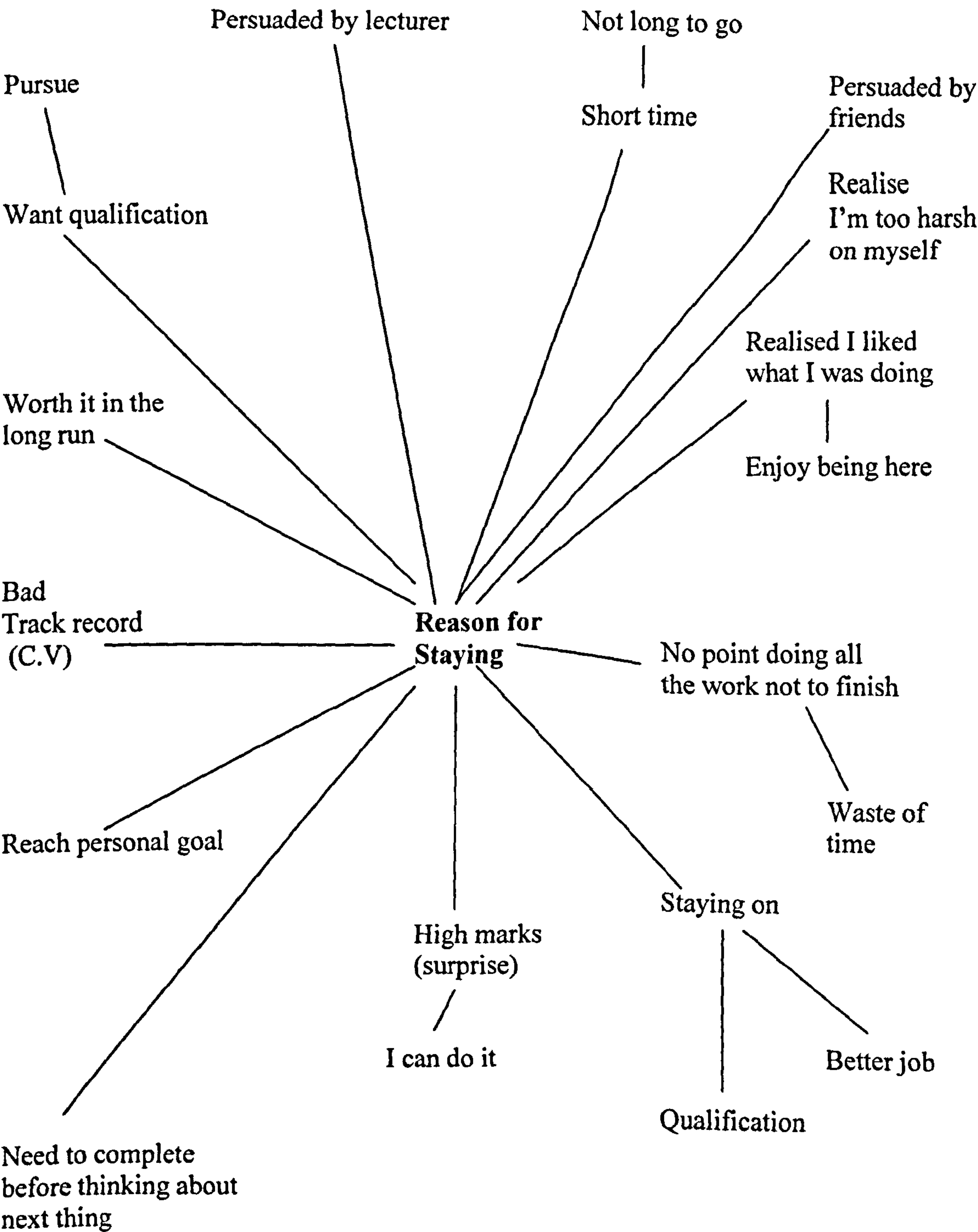
Appendix 7b: Diagram - Friends



Notes

- Relationships
- consider types of friends
 - context of friendship
 - levels of friendship?
 - commitment (effort, time)

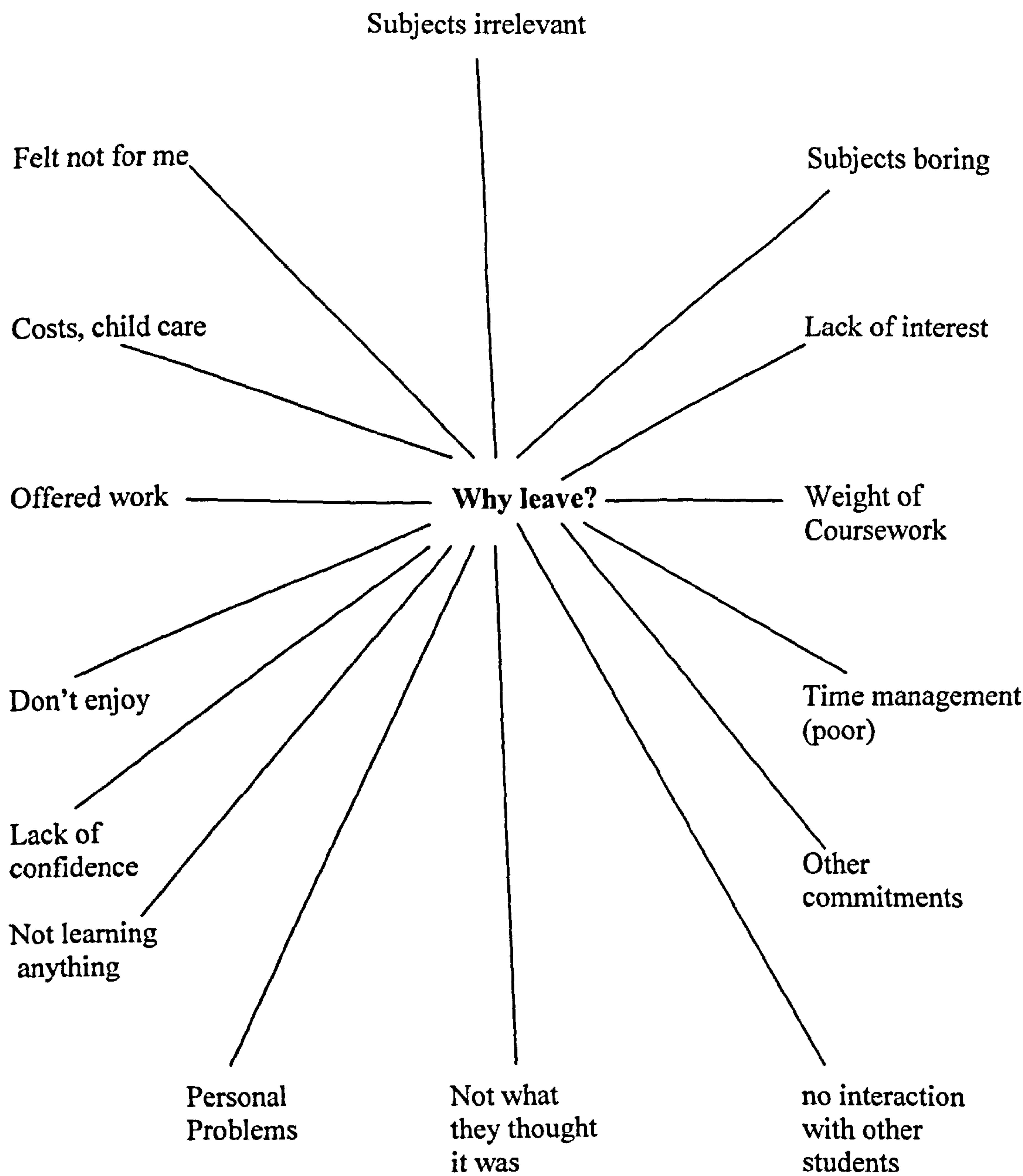
Appendix 7b: Diagram - Reason for Staying



Notes

Appears to be time link. Decision considers investment of effort. Reflection on efforts so far. A point of no return? Revelations?

Appendix 7b: Diagram - Why Leave?



Notes
All reasons for leaving, but some still stay! Link to pre-guidance? Role of staff – subject delivery, relationship. Causes – personal, subject.

Appendix 7c: Research Journal Entry re Mature students (5th May 2008)

Bring life skills and work skills when they join College. Perhaps the mature students don't appreciate importance of these?

Compare shortfall against younger students. Younger students seen as advantaged due of being just out of school.

Demands on mature students different from younger students. Mature students have house to manage, need to care for partner, children, and relatives. Still need to balance part-time work and College work.

Age is a barrier and a reason for being back in College. What about age as a motivator?

Fears -

1. Am I good enough?
2. Fitting in
3. College work – unable to do it
4. Failure

Confidence building a possible strategy? How? Assessment feedback perhaps early in the course, more formative assessment. Burden on staff and students?

Earlier comments re recognition they could do it, staying longer and doing another year, also belonging. Cycle of self doubt, reinforcement? So constant reflection, revelations.

Confidence is an issue.

Feelings from interviews.

1. What am I doing here?
2. Must be off my head
3. Want it to end
4. Walk away
5. Been here long enough

Extra pressure, stress? Issue perhaps how to cope, source of support.

Coping appears to be through family, partners, College friends, lecturer.

Worth looking at mature students' expectations.